Wedged in the Middle: Higher Education Middle Managers Navigating the Complexities of Implementing Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees

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Dedication

Dad:

I did it.

Thank you!

Love Always!
Buddah

Acknowledgments

"*Wherever I am, usually I'm the show. Like, the truth of the matter is, you know, anywhere you go, whether it's a college, senior living facility, or a hospital, whatever it is, you have to come see me three times a day to eat. And if my stuff isn't good, you're really not gonna come back.*"

Interview Excerpt from Dissertation Study Participant #17 (the number of victory!)

I would like to extend a tremendous amount of deep gratitude to everyone who has had a part in guiding and supporting me in completing the dissertation. For your patience and your care, I will always be deeply indebted to you.

However, as a teacher, I would be remiss to not utilize this free space to share a lesson.

From the beginning of my journey to Dr. Ayana J. Thomas, my problem of practice was connected to the pull on my heart I experienced when I encountered the realities of the hard working people who make things shake every day so that many of us can be comfortable in our places of work and learning. These bright lights who are often overlooked, unappreciated, and in many situations, disrespected have undoubtedly shaped who I am as a woman, a daughter, a sister, a mother, a friend, a professional, a scholar, and now a Doctor. Being able to share space with every person that I interacted with throughout this process was so deeply rewarding. The immense amount of pride you have in your work (as noted in the quote above) is contagious and awe inspiring. I see you. I value you. I want the best for you.

To those of you reading this scholarly work, I urge you to find the joy of human expression tucked neatly into the confines of the academic requirements of this dissertation. In your daily reality, please appreciate those people in your life who walk paths similar to those highlighted in this work. Introduce yourself. Get to know them as people. I promise your life will be enriched. Because at the end of the day, the day gon' end. We are just people navigating our way through each day and learning as we go. At the core of the human experience, we are one. Spread love.

A space for gratitude -
Thank you to the cadre of elite faculty and professional staff that supported the dissertation process. Dr. Khilji, thank you for stepping in and leading the charge across the finish line. We literally would not be here without you! Thank you, Dr. Vanderbilt for your insights in the classroom that inspired me and for your willingness to lend your expertise to enhance the beauty of this dissertation. Dr. Barnes, thank you for keeping me grounded, for always calling a spade a spade, and for your constant encouragement!

Finally, thank you to Dr. Egan for believing in my vision and for helping me to find my way early in the process. Thank you all for your patience, care, and dedication to scholarly excellence!

Infinite thank yous, gratitude, and appreciate to:

SMM - You can have anything you want, if you are willing to work for it. Love you infinity! xoxo

My Golden Girls - For life, I give you great praise and appreciation. Thank you for your sacrifices, encouragement, and care. Thank you for looking after me and my baby!

Thomases - My dawgs for real

Abstract of the Dissertation

Wedged in the Middle: Higher Education Middle Managers Navigating the Complexities of Implementing Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees

From 2020-2025, higher education institutions in the United States have had to continuously respond to ongoing resource and labor shortages attributed first to the COVID-19 pandemic and most recently attributed to the cancellation of federal funding triggered by the current presidential administration (Center for American Progress, 2025; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021; Marsicano et al., 2020). Like most organizations, when there are changes within higher education institutions, middle managers are expected to translate organizational directives into operational actions for their employees and in tandem, support the development of employee jobs skills to achieve these directives through structured or unstructured workplace learning activities (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Mair, 2002). Now more than ever, there is a necessity for organizations to provide high-quality workplace learning programs that support organizational goals and aid in the ongoing development of its employees. This basic qualitative study was guided by one central research question: *How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?*

This study contributes four findings to the scholarly discourse on the identity and role of middle managers in organizations by highlighting the essential nature of middle managers to business operations, while identifying a deficiency in middle managers' ability to develop

adequate workplace learning programs for frontline employees. Additionally, this study details the impact of organizational context on the strategic prioritization of workplace learning and illuminates a breakdown in upwards communication between middle managers and senior leaders. This study emphasizes the significance of middle managers in higher education operations as they manage a multitude of duties to support organizational viability and guide employee development. The findings from this study illuminate the critical role middle managers play in driving organizational strategy and supporting the development of their employees through the implementation of structured and unstructured workplace learning activities.

Keywords: Middle Managers, Workplace Learning, Human capital theory, Frontline Employees

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Middle managers (by title, organizational position, and definition) are integral to organizations, as they interpret top-down directives into performance actions for their frontline teams (Harding et al., 2014). The vastness of middle managers' responsibilities in higher education operations is no different, as they oversee frontline employees working in a wide variety of technical areas in university facilities (e.g., mechanical trades and custodial), food service, and other administrative functions supporting operations. Organizations must adapt internally to the influences and pressures of the external environment in which they operate, so middle managers "leap into action" to prepare their frontline employees for the changes at hand (Kuriatun & Rosalin, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968). Oftentimes, these changes require that "training and development strategies are put in place to contribute to the ultimate goal of the business" (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p. 1). Hence, middle managers must be equipped to develop workplace learning activities that meet frontline employees' learning needs and support their development in line with organizational-level changes.

Research for this basic interpretive qualitative research study began at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when organizational stability, employee turnover, and inflation threatened the future of organizations worldwide (Tessema et al., 2022). During this time, middle managers and frontline employees across all industries provided essential services in critical trades to maintain organizational operations (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). However, organizational conditions were not much different in 2025, when 600 colleges and universities in the United States had to account for the reduction of more than $7 billion in federal grant funding (Center for

American Progress, 2025), which negatively impacted operational budgets, triggered staff layoffs, constrained international student enrollment, and eliminated a host of other programmatic resources.

Human capital theory suggests that investments in employee education, training, and well-being are necessary to maintain organizational viability (Au et al., 2008; Becker, 1994; Leoni, 2025). Hence, "effective leaders focus on identifying observable employee behaviors and environmental conditions that affect these behaviors" to drive organizations and their employees toward established performance goals (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011, p. 132). Therefore, Hellriegel and Slocum (2011) advised that the leader is responsible for "provid[ing] learning experiences in an environment that will simplify the learning process and promote the employee behaviors desired by the organization" (p. 133).

Despite ongoing resource uncertainties, middle managers are still expected to develop workplace learning activities for frontline employees (Engle et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Kyndt et al., 2013; Kuriatun & Rosalin, 2016; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017). Therefore, by understanding middle managers' experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, organizational leaders can positively influence organizational conditions to encourage the planning of workplace learning activities that support the desired trend in employee performance.

Middle Managers' Role in Driving Organizational Performance

Middle managers are essential human resources of organizations, as they receive organizational directives from senior leaders and translate them into action at the service (i.e., frontline) level (Engle et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2014; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al.,

1968). According to Floyd and Woolridge (1997), “Middle managers are organization members who link the activities of vertically related groups and who are responsible for at least sub-functional workflow, but not the workflow of the organization as a whole” (p. 472). At the middle manager level, organizational goals and directives are translated into tangible actions, which are then disseminated for employees to interpret and execute.

According to Harding et al. (2014), “Middle managers occupy a central position in organizational hierarchies, where they are responsible for implementing senior management plans by ensuring junior staff fulfill their roles” (p. 1213). Oftentimes, middle managers must convey new directives to their employees, so the need arises to adapt operating practices to achieve such directives. Therefore, middle managers must close the skill gap that emerges when new skills are needed by ensuring that their employees can access workplace learning activities that support the development of these new skills, as well as reskilling and upskilling, so that frontline employees can modify their daily work (AL-Rawahi, 2022). Managing this reality can be difficult for middle managers. Nevertheless, they must resiliently respond to the constantly evolving demands of their organizations while simultaneously managing the ongoing needs of their teams.

A qualitative study of middle manager identities conducted by Harding et al. (2014) examined the relationship between middle managers’ performance in their roles, subordinate performance, and organizational performance. Harding et al. (2014) noted that middle managers are responsible for a diverse set of responsibilities that can make or break individual, team, and organizational success.

In another qualitative study, Johansen and Hawes (2016) identified five ways a middle manager’s leadership can impact organizational performance: (1) setting clear

goals, (2) communicating with subordinates and stakeholders, (3) HR management, (4) participative management, and (5) resource distribution. Providing workplace learning activities (e.g., classroom and on-the-job training) is a responsibility commonly aligned with the organization's HR management function. This responsibility falls under the resource distribution area for middle managers, as identified by Johansen and Hawes (2016). However, whether middle managers are directly involved in creating workplace learning content, they are responsible for interpreting organizational directives into actions for frontline employees and ensuring their teams have access to the necessary workplace learning content to support their development and enable the effective execution of their duties (Johansen & Hawes, 2016).

Although this study does not explicitly explore the impact of workplace learning on individual or organizational performance, improved performance is an implicit positive causal outcome of effective workplace learning activities. As such, it is referenced as an implicit outcome of workplace learning throughout this dissertation.

Workplace Learning

Workplace learning (e.g., employee training and development) is a vehicle through which organizations guide the expansion of employee work skills that drive organizational performance while also incentivizing employees (especially frontline employees) to develop new capabilities that can positively impact both themselves and their organizations (Jacobs & Park, 2008; Wright et al., 1994; Wright et al., 2001). Historically, organizations have largely focused on providing workplace learning opportunities that are compliance-based for employees, especially frontline employees (Wotschalk, 2020). However, providing only compliance-based workplace learning resources is a disservice to frontline employees who require more skill-based

opportunities to maintain existing job skills and build new technical ones (Kyndt et al., 2013).

The Association for Talent Development (ATD; 2022) reported that compliance-based and skill-based learning activities account for an average of 10% of the learning activities available for an organization's employees. The ATD (2022) reported that an average of 70% of available workplace learning resources are typically geared toward an organization's higher-skilled workforce. The remaining percentage is dedicated to new employee orientation.

Thus, limited workplace learning activities have been specifically designed to support frontline employee skill development in organizations across the United States (ATD, 2022). Concurrently, little evidence supports that middle managers in higher education operations receive substantial training to adequately support learning and development for their direct reports. These factors indicate that scholarly research is needed to assess how middle managers make sense of their responsibilities in translating organizational directives to frontline employees, account for workforce skill gaps, provide access to workplace learning activities to address these skill gaps, and better position the employees to meet established performance goals.

Critical Trades Workers During the COVID-19 Era

Middle managers have always played a key role in ensuring that daily operational goals are met (Engle et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016). However, this role became even more crucial as the impacts of COVID-19 became a reality for organizations in 2020 (Hite & McDonald, 2020; Hughes, 2021). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations' dependence on middle managers and frontline employees became evident, as organizations were required to shift from

in-person to virtual operations to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect public health (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). In many organizations, including institutions of higher education, middle managers and frontline employees were officially deemed essential employees or "critical trades" workers (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Therefore, they were required to report to work in person to maintain operational continuity.

In its definition of critical trades, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL; 2021) included operations employees, such as HVAC technicians, plant operators, custodians, and other critical trade roles deemed necessary to operate organizations. The National Conference of State Legislatures (2021) offered this delineation: "The critical trades sector is composed of professionals trained in any number of key services that are critical to keeping homes, offices and other buildings operating" (p. 9). Notably, employees' mental, physical, and emotional well-being in "critical trades" (i.e., frontline employees) were most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the requirement to report to work in person, while others had the luxury of sheltering in place and working from home (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the working conditions of frontline employees, which were exacerbated for these critical trades workers.

The lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered widespread labor shortages, operational delays for organizations, and a reallocation of internal resources away from staff resources, including workplace learning (Tessema et al., 2022). According to the ATD (2022), "Companies continued to change the way they delivered learning as they responded to these economic challenges and rapidly changing

pandemic-related restrictions" (p. 7). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) reported that 4.4 million American workers resigned from their places of employment in 2021. Considering these systemic gaps, organizations prioritized operational continuity and other pandemic response activities (e.g., enhanced COVID testing, expanded sick leave, and other employee wellness programs) over workplace learning programs and activities (AL-Rawahi, 2022). The need to respond to the impacts of COVID-19 unimaginably strained organizations and their employees.

The result has been ongoing sickness, employee turnover, and other factors associated with emerging labor trends, such as the Great Resignation (Tessema et al., 2022), which have created resource gaps and the need for additional training, as employees have assumed additional responsibilities or transitioned to new roles within their organizations. AL-Rawahi (2022) stated,

> As a result of the pandemic, the need of learning new skills, reskills, and upskills has increased dramatically in order to adapt to the new situation, which has expedited changes in skill demand and the likelihood of structural upheavals in labor markets throughout the world, [so] there is an urgent need for quality training to support a healthy economic recovery. (p. 1)

Furthermore, job market instability has expanded the need for organizations to provide workplace learning programs to retain current employees while attracting new ones.

The Failing Rebound of Workplace Learning Since COVID-19

Prior to the COVID-19 era, frontline employees were identified as the workforce most in need of organizational support via workplace learning programs to provide opportunities for professional development and achieve organizational goals (Kyndt et

al., 2013). Since 2020, organizations have reconciled "doing more with less" by consistently adapting to respond to the organizational demand on limited available human capital and the negative impacts to operations triggered by ongoing economic instability. As a result, studies were conducted between 2021 and 2023 to understand COVID-19's impacts on workplace learning and to assess how workplace learning programs adjusted as organizations returned to in-person operations (AL-Rawahi, 2022; ATD, 2022, 2023, 2024; Smerek, 2022). These studies found significant fluctuations in available resources across four areas: the level of organizational investment in workplace learning activities, the number of hours employees engage in workplace learning activities, the amount of time managers must dedicate to employee development, and the delivery method of workplace learning activities.

Specifically, qualitative studies conducted by Smerek (2022) and AL-Rawahi (2022) sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on workplace learning methods and how the availability of workplace learning activities affected employee performance during the first year of the pandemic. Smerek's (2022) study of 308 employees found a 15% increase in respondents who had no access to workplace learning since the beginning of the pandemic. Smerek also found a significant decrease "in the use of workshops (49.03% points), since before the pandemic" (p. 70). This study highlighted the negative impacts on workplace learning in organizations by showing how workplace learning programs were altered and significantly reduced for employees who historically participated in in-person training and development activities. Additionally, this study illuminated the increased elimination of training and development programs for frontline employees. Hence, Smerek's study documented an important shift in workplace learning

history, as many organizations were required to make similar adjustments in the format, frequency, and accessibility of workplace learning activities during the pandemic.

Similarly, AL-Rawahi's study (2022) attributed the decline in employee performance to modified organizational priorities, the shift to virtual operations, and significantly reduced access to on-site workplace learning activities for essential frontline employees. This study found that the "COVID-19 epidemic has greatly hampered the skilling, upskilling, and reskilling of Oman Air personnel, apprentices, and interns," as reported by 86% of the study participants (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p. 7). Despite training and development being a priority for Oman Air before the COVID-19 pandemic, AL-Rawahi (2022) noted a reduction in workplace learning activities during the first year of the pandemic. Additionally, AL-Rawahi reported a lack of customization specific to frontline employees' workplace learning needs due to the transition to virtual training, which required them to utilize new technologies to engage in training without the technological competency to do so.

Despite organizations' best efforts to return operations and resource availability to pre-pandemic conditions, ongoing inflation and other external factors have deterred them from restoring workplace learning offerings to meet employees' needs. The ATD (2023) reported decreased per-employee spending on workplace learning from 2020 to 2022 for the average U.S. organization. Researchers have agreed that the organization's investment in professional development programs (e.g., workplace learning) should communicate to employees that the organization values their service and wants to retain them over the long term (Au et al., 2021; Lee & Bruvold, 2003; Smerek, 2022; Yarbrough et al., 2016). However, high turnover rates and labor shortages have continued to create challenging

operating conditions for organizations, which should signal the need to invest in employee retention, with workplace learning as a critical area for investment.

Frontline employees, commonly referred to in the empirical literature as "low-wage or low-skill" employees, have been identified as one of the labor groups most affected by the issues triggered by the global pandemic (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). Hence, they have felt the negative impacts of cuts to federal aid programs (Khan, 2025). Nonetheless, due to ongoing strains on organizational resources at the individual, organizational, and human capital levels, organizations must provide learning opportunities for developing employee skills to support an evolving organizational landscape while positioning employees to remain competitive in the labor market.

Indeed, organizations cannot exist without human capital (Becker, 1993), so middle managers play a significant role in managing and developing it. As has been true for many years, "Companies in all industries are recognizing the importance of customer satisfaction and how the quality of frontline customer service providers can make or break a company" (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011, p. 132). The stressed state of organizational resources that has persisted beyond the COVID-19 pandemic era calls for organizations to prioritize workplace learning opportunities to meet the unique developmental needs of their employees.

In October 2024, when the data collection for this qualitative research study began, no one could foresee how the inauguration of the new presidential administration in January 2025 would impact higher education. The current administration has "waged financial and cultural war on higher education—freezing research funds, punishing efforts at campus diversity, constricting the flow of foreign students, raising the tax on

some college endowments and curbing the generosity of student loan programs" (Whitford & Novak, 2025, p. 1). For example, 600 colleges and universities in the United States have been called on to account for the reduction of more than $7 billion in federal grant funding (Center for American Progress, 2025), which has negatively impacted operational budgets, triggered staff layoffs, and negatively impacted other programmatic resources, including workplace learning programs.

Wright et al. (2001) noted, "In times of plenty, firms easily justify expenditures on training, staffing, reward, and employee involvement systems, but when faced with financial difficulties, such HR systems fall prey to the earliest cutbacks" (p. 701). Therefore, now more than ever, higher education institutions must identify innovative solutions that support the ongoing development of their employees, despite the resource uncertainties they face in the coming years.

This study seeks to understand the role of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, despite the constantly changing priorities of the universities they serve. Therefore, the following sections provide a general overview of this qualitative research study by justifying the research problem and question while presenting its purpose and overviewing the theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, and other key information to frame the study.

Significance of the Study

Human Resources scholars have noted the strain on human capital and material resources as constant pain points for organizations, especially in higher education (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016; Wright et al., 1994; Wright et al., 2001). According to Melhorn-Ferguson and Hoover for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2023), lower-paid professionals (e.g., frontline employees) have been most negatively impacted

economically and socially in the United States since 2020. The ability to acquire new skills or education was also cited by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2023) as a reason why employees have left jobs or have had difficulty re-entering the job market since 2020.

Wright et al. (1994) explained, “Much of the writing in the strategic human resource management literature has focused on employee behavior, rather than on employee skills, as the mediator in the relationship between a firm’s strategy and performance” (pp. 6–7). However, middle managers play a key role in aligning an organization’s employees with the achievement of organizational goals (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Middle managers are responsible for interpreting top-down directives while managing their implementation with their frontline employees from the bottom up by ensuring they have the job skills needed to achieve their performance goals (Harding et al., 2014).

Historically, organizations (e.g., universities) have not understood the return on investment from assessing frontline employee workplace learning needs and appropriately allocating resources toward programs and activities for them (Callahan, 2007; Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). As a result, frontline employees have often not received the needed support while frequently stagnating in their roles, which has resulted in detrimental outcomes for both employees and organizations.

Per Nafukho et al. (2004), “The fundamental principle underpinning of human capital theory is the belief that people’s learning capacities are of comparable value to other resources involved in the production of goods and services” (p. 545). Middle managers and frontline employees provide a considerable service to institutions of higher

education and have a significant role in how stakeholders (e.g., prospective students, current students, parents, and alumni) perceive the benefits of affiliation with these institutions (Kuriatun & Rosalin, 2016). Unknowingly, these authors illuminated the disconnect in empirical literature seeking to understand the role workplace learning plays in the development of frontline employees at institutions of higher education. Therefore, this study sought to understand and contribute to the existing use of human capital theory by exploring the role of middle managers' and higher education institutions' investment in workplace learning for frontline employees.

A review of the empirical literature identified five key areas of significance to theory, research, and practice that justifies the significance of this study. As a result, this study aims to (1) further scholarly discussion related to the value of human capital resources in helping employees and institutions of higher education achieve organizational goals, (2) examine the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees, (3) identify and address the gap in structured workplace learning and the human capital theory literature related to addressing the workplace learning needs of frontline employees, (4) fortify the feedback loop required for ongoing engagement between middle manager teams and employee populations throughout the organization, and (5) provide a roadmap for resourced and inclusive structured workplace learning practices within universities and other organizations.

Purpose Statement

The goal of this basic interpretive qualitative study is to contribute to a scholarly understanding of the experiences of middle managers in higher education operations and how they understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline

employees. Middle managers are considered the "lynch-pins between senior management and junior staff" (Harding et al., 2014, p. 5), so they play a critical role in advancing many organizational practices, including workplace learning (Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968). Although middle managers are responsible for employee development, their autonomy and capacity as regulators of the organization and its resources is heavily influenced by organizational policies and procedures, goals, and available resources (Mair, 2002). Hence, when middle managers are ill positioned or lack the resources to support employee development, everyone within the organization fails to achieve the stated goals. Therefore, understanding the experiences of middle managers supporting workplace learning for frontline employees can encourage much-needed dialogue about the effectiveness of workplace learning activities and the interconnectedness between the roles of middle managers and frontline employees in organizations.

Research Question

The research question for this study is, "How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?"

Conceptual Framework

Due to the breadth of the problem identified during the development of this study, connections were made to many theories in economics, learning, HR, and organizational development. Specifically human capital theory and the HR view of resource-based theory emerged to underpin the design of the study during the literature review process. According to Robinson and Pope (2023), "Human Capital Theory assumes that investment in education is necessary to acquire skills and training, which in turn will increase individual capital" (p. 245). In comparison, the HR view of resource-based

theory (Wright et al., 1994) assumes that human capital is the resource that most contributes to the organizational (e.g., an institution of higher education) ability to achieve key performance indicators. As depicted in Figure 1, these theoretical views support the perceived relationship between middle managers' role in implementing workplace learning activities and the associated outcomes of individual and organizational performance.

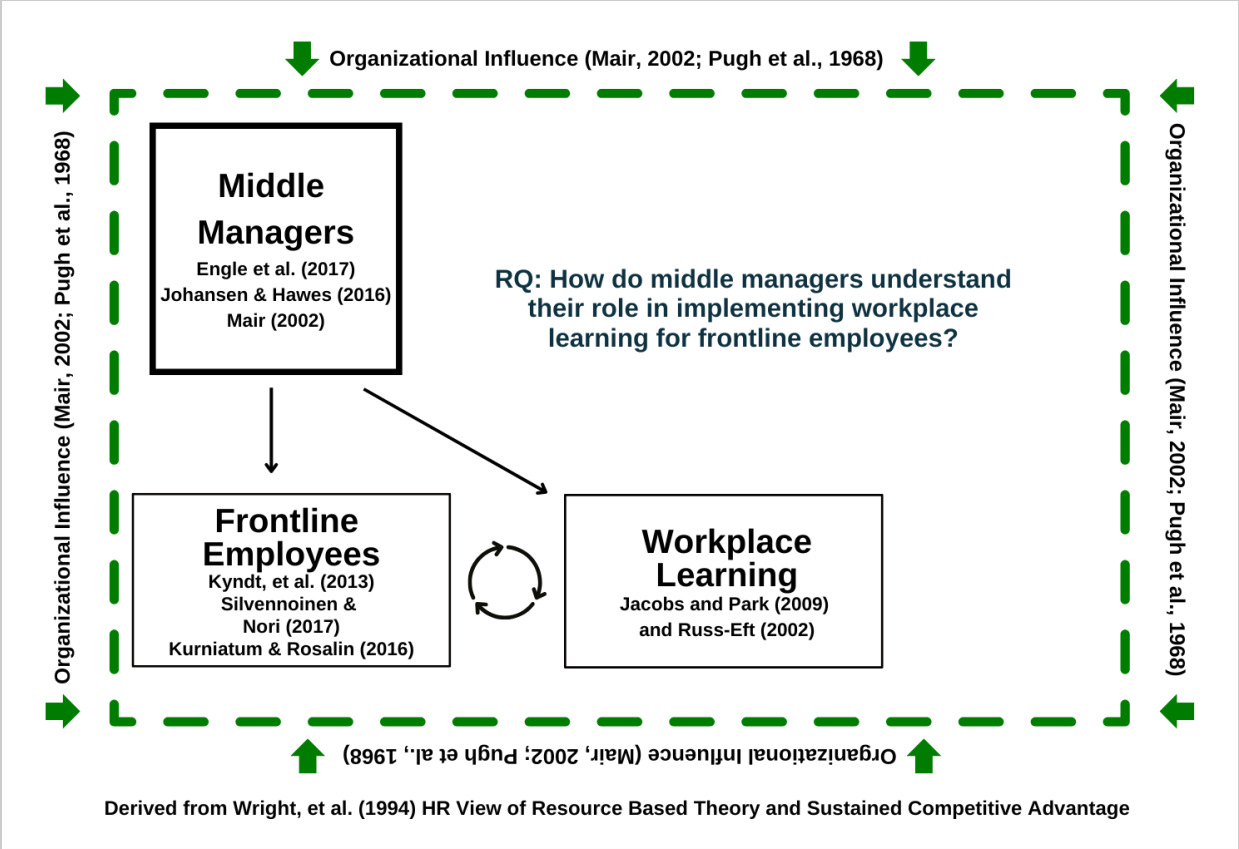
Figure 1 amplifies the dynamism of the relationship between the organization, middle managers, and frontline employees, with workplace learning as a contributing factor to performance outcomes for the organization and the employee. The dotted green line around the perimeter of the images represents the organizational boundary and influences (Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968) on each of the relational elements of the conceptual framework (i.e., middle managers, frontline employees, workplace learning, and performance outcomes). Middle managers are positioned above the other relational elements of the conceptual framework to represent their organizational position as intermediaries (Engle et al., 2017; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002), as they receive organizational directives from senior leadership and disseminate them to frontline employees. Frontline employees are represented below middle managers to demonstrate their positioning in the reporting relationship to middle managers (Kyndt et al., 2013; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017; Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016) .

The two arrows branching off the middle managers represent their influence in leading frontline employees and developing workplace learning activities (Engle et al., 2017; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002). The circle between frontline employees and workplace learning represents the cyclical relationship between them (Jacobs & Park,

2009). The conceptual framework for this study was modified throughout the research proposal development process to ensure each of the elements were properly represented visually.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Summary of Methodology

This study was designed as a basic interpretive qualitative research study. This methodology was selected to allow the research participants' experiences to emerge through their "account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). Creswell (2013) articulated that data for

qualitative studies are best gathered through interviews as the primary form of data gathering, while document reviews, observations, and other forms of data support the stories told by the research participants. As a result, 17 middle managers employed by four higher education institutions in the Washington DC regional area were the focus of this study.

Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) was employed using a pre-screening questionnaire to identify potential study participants for single 1-hour, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom as the primary method of data collection. Interview audio was recorded via Zoom, and transcripts were prepared using Scribie. Interview transcriptions were member-checked for validity (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Moreover, site observations and a review of institutional documents related to past and upcoming workplace learning activities were conducted to strengthen data triangulation. Verification (i.e., trustworthiness) was achieved through prolonged participant engagement, triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, and member checking (Creswell, 2013). Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2022) thematic analysis for qualitative studies was used to analyze, code, and identify themes from the three data sources. Finally, I used field notes and regularly engaged with the dissertation committee to maintain accountability.

Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative research study was designed based on a review of the empirical literature, which revealed a lack of research focused on the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees in institutions of higher education. Creswell (2013) noted that a purposeful sample "intentionally sample[s] a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research

problem under examination" (p. 147). Based on the literature review, I determined that middle managers in higher education operations were the population best suited to address the research problem, as this study seeks to deeply understand the role these middle managers play in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Therefore, this study relies on the fact that middle managers have a population of frontline employees for whom they are directly or indirectly responsible for creating and coordinating workplace learning activities (Mair, 2002).

Limitations

Since middle managers have a direct supervisory relationship with frontline employees, middle managers are often better informed and more engaged in assessing the learning needs of frontline employees, measuring their professional development and work performance, and relating outcomes to the broader organizational performance (Harding et al., 2014). The direct supervisory relationship between middle managers and frontline employees is one of many factors that distinguish middle managers from other organizational leaders (Mair, 2002) as participants in this study. Although senior leaders and frontline employees are both directly affected by middle managers' work, incorporating the former's perspectives was beyond the scope of this study. Future studies can expand on this study's outcomes by surveying both senior leaders and frontline employees about their experiences with the identified problem and comparing them.

Middle managers are consistently occupied during the business day, as they obtain information from senior leaders and translate it into actions for frontline employees (Mair, 2002). As a result, pulling middle managers away from their daily work could have impacted their ability to focus intentionally on the interviews required for

participation in this study. Their busyness could have also negatively impacted their ability to participate in the interviews without interruption.

This limitation was regularly present during data collection. Middle managers' interviews were often interrupted by emergent organizational demands and employees. Therefore, study participants had the best intentions to be fully engaged but were often distracted or required to attend to another commitment after completing their interviews.

Delimitations

This qualitative research study was designed according to four delimitations. Delimitations are researcher-imposed restrictions on a study that help establish its parameters (Miles, 2019). First, this study was delimited according to organization type and geographical location. Universities (and university-affiliated entities) represent eight of the top 20 organizations with the most employees in the District of Columbia (DC DOES, 2023). Hence, institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area were deemed the best organization type to inform this study, given their significant contributions to the regional labor market. Additionally, I chose to delimit the study by organization type and geographical location because I first experienced the problem of practice within this specific organizational context in the identified region.

Creswell (2013) recommended that the sample size for a qualitative study should include an ideal number of sites and participants to allow the researcher to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied. Therefore, the sample size was limited to 15–20 participants working at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area. The outcome was that 17 participants completed 1-hour semi-structured interviews. These participants represented four universities headquartered

in the identified region. This study size allowed me to spend ample interview time with each study participant while also conducting site observations and document reviews.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study to support a delimitation based on the identified study criteria to ensure that data were collected from study participants who could speak to the phenomenon under investigation. However, the use of purposeful sampling did not remove my potential predispositions. Maxwell (2013) argued that separating these truths from the researcher's perspective has the potential to cut the researcher off from "major sources of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (p. 45). Similarly, reflexive thematic analysis values "a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 5). Therefore, I assessed my feelings and reactions to the interviews, on-site observations, and document review by maintaining field notes and checking in regularly with the dissertation committee throughout data collection and analysis to ensure the research created space for me to immerse myself in the data fully while also being mindful not to allow my biases to lead the data analysis.

As with all qualitative research, intersubjectivity, findings framed within the bounds of participants' responses, and the limitations of the study's context were among the study's limitations. I assessed my relationship to the research prior to commencing data collection to ensure reflexivity. Although I identified the research problem in a professional role that I previously held, I assumed the role of an outsider (Clarke, 2021) during data collection and analysis. Nonetheless, my researcher identity and subjectivity were conveyed to the study participants in their invitations to participate and appropriately characterized in this written report of the research study.

Definition of Key Terms

It is imperative to provide contextual definitions for the terms that were used throughout this study. These terms, included in Table 1, were gathered from the empirical literature review I conducted to support the development of this study.

Table 1

Key Terms

Middle Managers	"… the direct supervisors of the workers in their unit and are responsible for hiring, evaluation, and improvement of those workers" (Johansen & Hawes, 2016, p. 593). "Staff with a supervisory capacity other than senior leaders (e.g., department managers, program managers, nurse managers, administrative directors, frontline supervisors)" (Engle et al., 2017, p. 16). "Middle managers are organization members who link the activities of vertically related groups and who are responsible for at least sub-functional work flow, but not the work flow of the organization as a whole" (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997, p. 472)

Frontline Employees	… are employees of a higher education institution, working in a direct, service-delivery capacity (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). These roles often involve direct interaction with university stakeholders, including students, staff, and other key members of the university community. Frontline employees are essential workers who provide critical trade services. "The critical trades sector is composed of professionals trained in any number of key services that are critical to keeping homes, offices and other buildings operating. Just some of the professions that can be considered a part of this sector include electricians, plumbers, HVAC technicians, wastewater treatment plant operators, exterminators and many others" (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021, p. 9). Customarily, attainment of these roles does not require an advanced education (beyond high school or GED completion). Frontline employees (also referred to in literature as low-skilled, low-income, or low-qualified) have a vital role in maintaining the operating capacity of an organization by providing essential services in a direct customer-facing role (Kyndt et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2016; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017).
Stakeholders in Higher Education	… include faculty, employees, students (past, present, and future), families, and visitors (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016).
Human Capital Theory	"Human Capital Theory assumes that investment in education is necessary to acquire skills and training, which in turn will increase individual capital" (Robinson & Pope, 2023). Furthermore, human capital theory explores the relationship between employer investment in staff training and employee performance.

Learning	… is a relatively permanent change in knowledge or observable behavior that results from practice or experience (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011, p. 132).
Workplace Learning	"… [is] the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet the current and future work requirements" (Jacobs & Park, 2009, p. 134). [It is] called training and development, which "refers to the process of providing workers with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their present and future positions" (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, training and development should be "seen as the organizational resource that aids in the acquisition, inference, and application of knowledge by workers" (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p. 1).
Structured Workplace Learning	"… [is] typically institutionally-sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured" (Marsick et al., 2017, p. 28) … [comprises] learning activities provided by the organization and facilitated with some degree of planning and involvement from a trainer or teacher (Jacobs & Parks, 2009)
Unstructured Workplace Learning	… includes learning activities that occur informally and as a need arises with no planning and some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher (Jacobs & Parks, 2009).
Human Resources View of Resource-Based Theory	Wright et al. (1994) adopted an evolved perspective on this theory, which focused on the role of human capital resources in helping a firm achieve competitive advantage, thereby supplementing human capital theory. The conceptual framework for this study was derived from Wright et al. (1994).

Washington DC Regional Area	The geographic boundaries for this study included the Washington DC regional area, specifically Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Middle managers working at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area were included in this study.

Organization of the Study

This section details the organization of this qualitative research study in the following chapters. Chapter 2 provides a review of the available research on middle managers' roles in the purposes and functions of workplace learning, and the supporting theoretical frameworks for this study. Additionally, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the workplace learning needs of frontline employees. Next, Chapter 3 provides the research methodology, including the participants, sampling procedures, research question, interview questions, and data gathering and analysis procedures. Subsequently, Chapter 4 presents the outcomes and findings of the research process and provides a synopsis of the data. Finally, Chapter 5 offers recommendations for implementation that can further both theory and practice in the areas identified in this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the available empirical literature and the theoretical frameworks specific to this study. This qualitative research study is guided by the research question: "How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?" This chapter details the strategies used to complete the literature selection methods and the process for delimiting the selected study criteria.

This chapter begins with a detailed synopsis of the theoretical underpinnings of human capital theory. Subsequently, it defines middle managers as a relevant population for this study, describes their various roles, and examines the relationship between workplace learning and frontline employees. Next, the narrative identifies frontline employees as a relevant population to the study, elaborates on the relationship between workplace learning and frontline employees, and centers the experience of frontline employees working in higher education institutions. Finally, the chapter provides historical context on workplace learning, its definition, and the organization's role in providing development opportunities for employees.

Literature Selection Methods

Sources identified for this empirical literature review included study-specific seminal publications (i.e., scholarly articles and books on related subjects) and peer-reviewed journal articles identified through online search engines and databases. The search began with accessible options via The George Washington University's library system, which was redirected to Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Open Edition Journals, Sage Journals, and JSTOR. Google

Scholar and the Department of Education's Resource Information Center (ERIC) were useful in locating several key resources. Finally, citations from articles identified early in the process were used to identify other scholarly works for this literature review. Following the citation paths from these sources helped identify seminal and recent works for each section of the literature review.

Search terms were refined several times throughout the research process to identify content relevant to the study topic for inclusion. For example, searching for the key term "professional development" returned results focused on professional development programs for K–12 educators but did not surface sources exploring experiences of middle managers in higher education operations. For instance, I found that extensive research has been conducted on primary education employees' professional development, which was not directly related to this study's topic. Similarly, a search for "middle managers in higher education" generated results focused on university middle managers working in university academics (e.g., associate deans and other academic officers), not middle managers working in higher education operations.

Nevertheless, I followed a consistent process as the literature review evolved to evaluate the literature findings. I filtered and refined the search terms to identify research focused on the workplace learning activities in corporate environments. More specifically, I applied these filters to identify research that considered middle managers and their role in the workplace learning experiences of frontline employees in higher education operations.

The initial set of search terms utilized was "learning programs for adults," "evaluating workplace learning," "measuring professional development," "effectiveness

of training in organizations," "workplace learning effectiveness," and "workplace training effectiveness." My use of these search terms enabled me to explore the development of the literature landscape, including which topics were of primary interest to other researchers, what prompted interest, and what they had not considered. This process of search refinement and the use of various search tools yielded 345 articles, journals, lecture videos, and research studies for review. Resources without a clear explanation of the research methods or insufficient qualitative or quantitative data to draw correlations to the research topic were not considered. The articles and resources identified for this literature review spanned 66 years (i.e., 1959–2025). Assessing authors' use of certain key terms and assessment data allowed for delimiting the articles identified to the 167 resources utilized herein.

The following research themes and ideas emerged from this literature review: middle manager identity, middle manager role in the organization, definitions of workplace learning for frontline employees, organization's responsibility to provide learning opportunities for employees, frontline employees' workplace learning needs, human capital theory, the HR view of resource-based view, and competitive advantage in higher education. The literature identified for this review informed the development of the research question, conceptual framework, and study design.

As this study aimed to explore how middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees, the review details the literature that supported the development of the conceptual framework, the guiding research question, and the methodology. The following sections align with the conceptual

framework's flow (Figure 1) to detail and demonstrate the relationships among the four major streams of literature included in this review.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory provides the theoretical underpinning for this basic qualitative study. Theories are developed on the assumption that certain factors are consistently present in the dynamics of the phenomenon under study. Kerlinger (1986) defined theory "as a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of predicting and explaining a phenomenon" (p. 9). Human capital theory is similar. As a theoretical framework in economics, human capital theory draws a connection between the post-secondary educational experiences of working professionals and the ability to advance their careers (Becker, 1976). Theoretically, increased wages and improved job skills are expected to be the outcome of applying human capital theory to an individual's investment in education.

Since the time when economists Adam Smith and Theodore Schulz provided the early theorization of human capital theory, researchers and scholars have critically assessed the theoretical application of human capital theory as organizational systems have evolved (Leoni, 2025). Strober (1990) described human capital theory's causal connection between education and increased earnings in this manner: "Education increases skills and these in turn productivity; higher productivity is then rewarded through higher earnings" (p. 214). Moreover, Tan (2014) identified the relationship between increased training, improved job skills, and higher productivity as key assumptions of human capital theory. Nevertheless, since the theory's establishment, scholars have noted that individuals may not have the capacity to make the intended

investment in education. Therefore, organizations are obliged to supplement employee education through workplace learning activities (Au et al., 2008).

Human capital theory, per Au et al. (2008), suggests that organizational investment in workplace learning yields mutual benefits for both the organization and the individual. Specifically, investment "in human capital through education and training develops the human capital level of a worker which entails a rise in her productivity which will lead to higher wages" (Au et al., 2008, p. 21). Hence, organizations benefit by ensuring employees have access to workplace learning opportunities as a means of sustaining employee performance and achieving organizational goals.

The literature presents the idea of an organization's responsibility for providing workplace learning as useful to all employees. According to Torraco and Swanson (1995), "Business success increasingly hinges on an organization's ability to use employee expertise as a factor in the shaping of business strategy" (p. 11). Although this idea has been researched for many years, organizations and middle managers have tended to design learning experiences that cater to the learning needs of the organization and higher-skilled employees. Sadly, many organizations consider investment in learning opportunities for frontline employees as a high-risk, low-return venture (Wotschak, 2020). As Wotschalk (2020) elaborated, "As they [organizations] are not able to predict actual gains in productivity (due to training), they focus on groups of people, where returns to training seem high and safe" (p. 248). Hence, organizations tend to allocate funding and resources to gear workplace learning activities toward meeting the competency level and needs of higher-skilled employees.

The core assumptions of human capital theory are aligned with the focus of this study, which explores the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Similarly, human capital theory is built on an underlying assumption that individuals do not have the resources to finance their own educational advancements without organization-provided workplace learning activities. Specifically, this empirical literature review illuminates that due to the low-wage nature of their roles, frontline employees lack the personal resources to support educational pursuits independently. As such, they depend on available workplace learning activities provided by organizations and initiated by middle managers for professional and personal advancement.

Human Capital Theory's Relationship to This Study

Human capital theory posits that investing time and financial resources in educational opportunities will advance individual development. In this context, human capital theory supports the concept of workplace learning as a means of providing ongoing professional development support to an organization's employees. Human capital theory also provides justification for organizational investment in employee or human capital development, based on the position that employees are a resource that drives improved organizational performance.

Similarly, the HR view of resource-based theory and sustained competitive advantage (Wright et al., 1994) offers key definitions that support investment in human capital and the development of the conceptual framework for this study. Wright et al. (1994) defined human resources as follows:

> … the pool of human capital under the firm's control in a direct employment relationship. … Human resources practices, on the other hand, are the organizational activities directed at managing the pool of human capital and ensuring that the capital is employed toward the fulfillment of organizational goals. (p. 6)

These definitions elevate the value and relevance of human behavior and influence on organizational processes and outcomes.

Human capital can be a source of improved organizational performance. Wright et al. (1994) noted that "human capital can improve the firm's ability to sense changes in critical environmental variables that require changes in a firm's activities" (p. 19). Thus, investment in ongoing professional development, as outlined by human capital theory, can position employees, especially frontline employees, to maintain the skills necessary to drive organizational performance. Therefore, this study seeks to expand the body of knowledge on human capital theory and its usefulness for understanding how investment in employee development benefits both employees and the organization.

Frontline employees are the population most dependent on workplace learning programs for skill mastery, ongoing professional development, and career advancement (Maxwell, 2006). McConnell et al. (2009) explained, "A more educated, better trained person is capable of supplying a larger amount of useful productive effort than one with less education and training" (p. 85). However, post-COVID-19, organizations have continued to struggle to allocate the necessary resources to make a significant difference for their frontline employees through workplace learning programs. Hence, exploring middle managers' understanding of the HR view of resource-based theory and sustained

competitive advantage of their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees is imperative to determine what enhancements can be made to improve workplace learning experiences for middle managers and their frontline teams.

Middle Managers

A need has existed since the rise of the manufacturing industry in the 19th century for individuals to serve in roles and capacities to lead and manage daily organizational operations. As industry mechanized and moved labor from a domestic to an industrial emphasis, more individuals were required to serve as managers (i.e., line managers) for mechanical assembly lines (Altman, 2008). As the organization has evolved under the structural influence of technology, managers have assumed many additional responsibilities while continuing to lead organizational operations. Hellreigel and Slocum (2011) distinguished between leaders and managers by noting that leaders carry the vision for the entire organization, while managers are more focused on planning and controlling the work for others.

According to U.S. News and World Report (2025), over 500 universities have undergraduate business management programs across the United States. These higher education programs clearly indicate the importance and common practice of developing managers in academia. Indeed, over 50 years of scholarly research have investigated the purpose and function of organizational managers.

Customarily, managers fall into the middle level of the organizational hierarchy, as they interpret and implement directives from senior leaders while translating and executing them at the sub-employee level. Therefore, the following sections define the role of a middle manager, summarize research on this role, and further outline middle

managers' positioning in this study. Middle managers were selected for this study because of their role in directing and developing employees.

Similar to the abundance of terms describing frontline employees, multiple terms exist for the role of a manager (e.g., supervisor, line supervisor, mid-management, middle manager, and director). This study chose to identify this population as middle managers, who

> … allocate resources, create budgets, schedules, and reports; and set rules and guidelines for those below them in the organization. … They build networks with those higher up in the organization, with other mid-level administrators, and with those outside the organization. … They are responsible for creating a sense of teamwork within the unit, motivating employees, and implementing and communicating the policies, missions, and goals of the organization. (Johansen & Hawes, 2016, p. 593)

Furthermore, Tope (2023) noted, "Rezvani (2017) suggested that scholars can use two specific criteria to define middle managers: their position in the organizational hierarchy and the roles they play in the organization" (p. 57).

This study employs definitions by Johansen and Hawes (2016) and Engle et al. (2017) as the primary definitions for middle managers. Specifically, Johansen and Hawes (2016) defined middle managers as mid-level administrators who are "direct supervisors of the workers in their unit and are responsible for hiring, evaluation, and improvement of those workers" (p. 593). Engle et al. (2017) defined middle managers "as staff with a supervisory capacity other than senior leaders (e.g., department managers, program managers, nurse managers, administrative directors, frontline supervisors)" (p. 16). These

managers oversee frontline employees and share responsibility for implementing workplace learning for their teams.

Studies of Middle Managers

In addition to establishing a baseline definition of the role of middle managers, other factors may also affect a middle manager's ability to carry out their duties (e.g., workplace learning initiatives). For instance, Harding et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study to understand how middle managers form their identities as they navigate the dynamics of taking direction from senior leadership and implementing strategy. Harding et al. (2014) highlighted studies by Watson (1994, 1996, 2008), which found that middle managers were often in subjugated positions that compromised their sense of personal security, led them to abandon ethical principles, and heightened their anxiety and insecurity.

Harding et al. (2014) concluded that the "middle managerial subject is limited in the ways that it can think, speak, and act; middle managers are therefore controlled by the very discourse that gives them the power to exercise control over others" (p. 1213). Harding et al. described middle managers as both the controllers and the controlled to illustrate the dual dynamics of middle managers' responsibilities. Hence, the actual implementation of new innovations could be compromised due to such volatility happening below the surface for middle managers.

Middle managers' identities "emerge from their being subjects and objects of control and subjects of resistance" (Harding et al., 2014, p. 1214). Given the dynamics of the middle manager's role in taking directives from senior leadership and being held accountable for actions at the frontline staff level of the organization, these managers

often navigate tension created when they disagree with a decision made by senior leadership or a performance issue at the staff level. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the pressure middle managers face to deliver on performance targets, as they often have little say in the design. In these situations, other important factors (e.g., employee safety, organizational policy compliance, and workplace learning prioritization) can be forsaken to prioritize a response to the more present challenge.

Middle managers are essential to organizations, as they play critical cross-organizational roles. Middle managers ensure the "efficient allocation, transfer, and sharing of resources and capabilities" (Mair, 2002, p. 2) by managing influence upward, downward, and across the organization. They often serve as the cog that keeps the wheel turning at various organizational levels. Hence, middle managers are viewed as "vital and loyal lynch-pins between senior management and junior staff; on the other hand, they obstruct the implementation of change and are a problem to be addressed" (Harding et al., 2014, p. 5). Therefore, securing middle manager buy-in for organizational goals is necessary to ensure that given directives are disseminated to employees. Furthermore, middle managers are also critical to ensure that allocated staff and resources are properly dispersed to execute a given directive.

Mair (2002) identified that "research has shown that middle managers assume an active role in both strategy implementation and strategy formulation. … They translate organizational goals and strategy into concrete actions. … They convert autonomous managerial action into strategic intent" (p. 2). Hence, middle manager behaviors can significantly impact both organizational and employee performance. Moreover, according to Johansen and Hawes (2016),

> The way in which managers direct and organize workers to match the organization's needs also matters. … The effective distribution of resources across the organization impacts performance because it ensures that workers have the necessary tools to do their jobs well and maximizes the limited resources of the organization. (p. 595)

Indeed, the responsibilities of middle managers span the organization. This broad scope of responsibility should prompt middle managers to extend their reach by adequately preparing their employees to respond to the needs of the organization by leveraging workplace learning to enhance employee skill development and improve organizational performance.

Middle Managers' Role in Implementing Workplace Learning

Middle managers were selected for this study because of their direct responsibility to oversee and implement structured and unstructured workplace learning plans for their employees. Structured workplace learning was defined by Jacobs and Park (2009) as learning activities provided by the organization and facilitated with some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher. Structured workplace learning includes on-the-job training, group-based classroom learning activities, formal mentoring and coaching, and courses offered by an institution of higher learning. Hence, middle managers are expected to be, as well as uniquely positioned to, directly influence the design and implementation of workplace learning activities for their employees.

Engle et al. (2017) posited that middle managers have four specific roles in the implementation of innovation: (1) diffusing information, (2) synthesizing information, (3) mediating between strategy and daily activities to give employees the tools they need,

and (4) selling the innovation to encourage employees to use it consistently and effectively. In this context, implementing a training program to promote the use of a new technology or training frontline employees on how to follow a new process would meet the criterion for innovation. Among these four ways, the third and fourth ways are the most critical for the learning application of frontline employees. Therefore, middle managers must transition out of a strategic mindset to connect to what support is needed through workplace learning at the frontline employee level. Additionally, these managers must also communicate the need for workplace learning in a way that prompts frontline employees to adopt the innovation consistently and effectively.

As middle managers mediate between interpreting directives from senior leadership and implementing them at the employee level, they are the most involved of all organizational leadership in the implementation of workplace learning. Engle et al. (2017) studied the middle manager's role in implementing innovative practices. Their study identified the emerging theme of the necessity of employee training for successful implementation. More specifically, their study found that continuous training in multiple formats (e.g., in-person and virtual) was relevant to the overall success of implementing the innovation. Their findings demonstrated how meaningful workplace learning can be for organizations, especially as they evolve.

The literature review compiled for this study reveals the pivotal role middle managers play in organizations by helping individuals achieve their performance goals. As middle managers catalyze several organizational functions, they also catalyze the primary area of focus in this study. This study aims to further scholarly dialogue on the role of middle managers, better understand their role in the service delivery of institutions

of higher education, and clarify their actions and the challenges they face when implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

Frontline Employees

As stated, frontline employees are essential workers who provide critical operations services to organizations (e.g., institutions of higher education). Historically, frontline employee populations have been the most vulnerable, as organizations have been forced to adapt to external operational pressure (Maxwell, 2006). Certainly, since 2020, lower-paid professionals (e.g., frontline employees) have been most affected, as organizations have been required to operate with record shortages in funding, staffing, and material resources (Center for American Progress, 2025; Evans et al, 2020; Mariscano et al., 2020).

As organizations have continued to modify operations to maintain viability, employees have been required to acquire new job skills and pursue other learning opportunities to remain competitive in the labor market (AL-Rawahi, 2021). The inability to acquire new skills or education was cited by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2023) as a reason why employees have left jobs or had difficulty re-entering the job market since 2020. Becker (1994) noted, “Even college graduates are not fully prepared for the labor market when they leave school and must be fitted into their jobs through formal and informal training programs” (p. 20). Hence, workplace learning programs continue to be the most accessible and essential tool in supporting the ongoing professional development of frontline employees.

Defining Frontline Employees

The term “frontline employees” has been loosely applied across various industries to identify employees with varying functional responsibilities. This term can directly

correlate with employees who are first responders or medical employees working in direct contact with patients in medical facilities. It can also refer to employees working in high-volume customer-facing service delivery positions. Maxwell (2006) explained that "60 percent of low-skilled jobs require mechanical knowledge, about 75 percent require operation and control skills, and over 80 percent require manual dexterity and wrist or finger speed" (p. 8). This distinction further delimits and clarifies the individuals explored in this literature review and research study.

The use of "frontline employees" in this study refers to those who work primarily in physical labor or trade-related functions. Customarily, these roles do not require advanced education beyond high school or GED completion. Frontline employees (also referred to in the literature as "low-skilled," "low-income," and "low-qualified") have a vital role in maintaining the organization's operating capacity. Therefore, the needs of frontline employees are unique and must always be prioritized at the organizational level (Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017).

Workplace learning programs ensure continued skill development and alignment with the organizational mission and operational goals. For these reasons, employee workplace learning programs must specifically address the learning needs of frontline employees. The definition of frontline employees in this study was developed by analyzing how they were referred to in the literature. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the various references to frontline employees in literature. While many of the key terms were different, the criteria used to identify members of this employee population were the same.

Table 3

Representations of Frontline Employees in the Empirical Literature

Literature References	**Researchers**
Low-qualified and low-performing workers	Kyndt et al. (2013)
Low-skilled workers	Maxwell (2006), Sanders and de Grip (2004), Wotschack (2020)
Junior-level employees	Au et al. (2008)
Low-wage workers	Maxwell (2006)
Low-income workers	Maxwell (2006)
Blue-collar workers	Silvennoinen and Nori (2017)
Working class	Harris (2000)
Critical trades	National Conference of State Legislatures (2021)
Essential workers	Department of Labor (2022)

Academic experiences for frontline employees are often limited to the knowledge they acquired in high school, trade school (for those who completed vocational programs during high school or skill certification programs afterward), and their limited workplace learning experiences (Maxwell, 2006). Per Kyndt et al. (2013), "Low-qualified employees are defined as employees with a low degree of educational background, or vocational track degrees that do not grant access to higher education" (p. 179). The skills and competencies frontline employees need to be successful and competitive in the workforce are often acquired through on-the-job training programs and peer-to-peer

mentoring. Hence, workplace learning serves as an essential tool in the ongoing professional development of frontline employees.

Jacobs and Park (2009) defined workplace learning as "the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet current and future work requirements" (p. 134). Notably, the context for workplace learning in this study specifically focuses on structured workplace learning activities implemented by middle managers.

Frontline Employees and Workplace Learning

Workplace learning curriculum is often designed with organizational needs as the frame of reference that determines the relevant content to share with employees. According to Merriam and Bierema (2014), "Educational opportunities sponsored by business and industry; indeed, all workplace training and educational programs are in the service of the business, and education is a secondary concern" (p. 16). In these instances, the unique needs of frontline employees are even further marginalized because the organization does not see the value of making an investment in learning for employees perceived to be low-performing, with a low motivation for success (Kyndt et al., 2013).

Middle managers must consider several factors when planning workplace learning activities. Kyndt et al. (2013) described three factors to consider when designing workplace learning and working to ensure an optimal learning environment for all learners: (1) each learner's individual characteristics, (2) the design of the learning activity or training, and (3) the social context in which the learning activity occurs. If any of these three factors are not strategically planned, the effectiveness of the learning

activity decreases significantly for the employee and, thus, for the organization. Kyndt et al. further argued the reality that a negative perspective of or attitude toward workplace learning activities can be prompted by various social factors, including a past negative learning engagement, scheduling a learning engagement during a time that conflicts with a non-work-related, personal obligation, a lack of understanding of how the learning engagement can benefit them both professionally and personally, and insecurity about learning capabilities.

This disengagement occurs between middle managers and frontline employees when the latter do not clearly understand the benefits that can result from participating in workplace learning activities. When frontline employees must choose between productivity and time away from completing their daily work tasks, they may decline participation in workplace learning activities. As much as the organization is interested in protecting its bottom line from a risk management and compliance standpoint, some employees have the autonomy to determine what benefits them and what does not.

Wotschalk (2020) noted, "From the workers' perspective, desired returns to training (such as financial benefits, job security, or promotion) can be denied by the employer" (p. 248). When employees encounter unfamiliar technology, language, and other barriers to learning, they are less likely to immerse themselves in the learning experience (Kunche et al., 2011). They are also less likely to find positive meaning in it. Indeed, a lack of planning for frontline employees' needs clearly indicates that the training is not meaningful for them.

Conversely, frontline workers' intention and motivation to learn increase when direct instruction, learning aids, or access to technology are incorporated into workplace learning design. As Kyndt et al. (2013) described,

> Learning intentions refer to the willingness, readiness, or even plan of employees to overcome a gap they are experiencing between their current knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the job and those that are required or assumed to be desirable through a specific educational track or training. (p. 180)

In these instances, frontline employees are more likely to push through other obstacles that may exist so that they can actively engage in the learning activity. Kyndt et al. (2013) recommended that organizations should not focus on the quantity of the learning activities but provide high-quality ones. Therefore, middle managers must be directly engaged with frontline employees while intentionally implementing customized workplace learning activities aligned with their specific learning needs (Russ-Eft, 2002).

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees

Organizations worldwide use training (e.g., workplace learning) to guide employees toward a desired performance goal. According to Kunche et al. (2011), "Training can be stated as the methods which are imparted to the employee in fulfilling the organizational goals" (p. 1). The term "training" refers to the transfer of skill-related information through various methods of facilitation. Tikkanen et al. (2018) explained, "Work-related training and non-formal and informal workplace learning are increasingly being recognised as a key to lifelong learning and to realising the potential for skills development" (p. 523). For frontline employees, training or workplace learning can serve as the only form of continued education beyond high school completion. Indeed, the

organization benefits through the increase in employee efficiency and overall productivity when training and workplace learning programs are designed to aid in developing all employees.

Workplace learning encompasses the process of learning outside of a formal academic classroom. Jacobs and Park (2009) defined structured workplace learning as learning activities provided by the organization and facilitated with some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher. Structured workplace learning includes on-the-job training, group-based classroom learning activities, formal mentoring and coaching, and courses offered by an institution of higher learning. Kunche et al. (2001) furthered this perspective by adding that "these training methods include on-the-job training, role playing, self-instruction, team building games and simulations, computer-based training, mentoring, and job rotation" (p. 2). Workplace learning is an essential function of an organization, as employees can obtain new information, maintain relevant skills, and develop new skills that help contribute to the overall efficacy and goal completion of the organization.

Organizations provide professional development opportunities to their team members through workplace learning programs. Although an organization may have allocated a set budget to support workplace learning activities, generally, the budget must be dispersed across the entire employee population, so the available amount of budget dollars per person decreases. The ATD (2023) reported that available budgets for workplace learning programs fluctuated during the COVID era but did not return to pre-pandemic totals. In 2022, the average direct expenditure for workplace learning was $1,220 per person (ATD, 2023). In many cases, this sum did not cover the cost of an

employee's specialized training or certification program, access to course materials, or the cost for an external facilitator to provide workplace learning services.

Often, training budget dollars must be pooled to provide workplace learning solutions to a larger group of employees rather than offer individual solutions. This perspective is important to consider because each employee has varying learning needs. Hence, if a group has more expensive learning needs, the cost of training can tax the overall workplace learning program and available funding for other employees.

The dynamic of balancing the workplace learning budget can often lead organizations to direct budget dollars to institutional learning systems that can optimize available funding and provide learning solutions to as many employees as possible. The challenge with these enterprise-system solutions relates to previously mentioned time management and technology barriers for frontline employees (Kunche et al., 2001). Thus, while organizations may have the best intentions of providing these enterprise learning systems, they nevertheless miss an opportunity to make workplace learning accessible to a key employee demographic.

Kunche et al. (2011) noted that "research indicates that employees gain approximately 80 percent of their work-related knowledge and skills on the job itself" (p. 2). Therefore, organizations must understand how their ineffective workplace learning programs affect frontline employees. Although workplace learning programs are a vehicle through which most team members filter their professional development, much workplace learning accessibility is inequitable. Indeed, all employees must have the same level of accessibility, applicability, and retention of workplace learning content. Although this literature review focuses on the research landscape regarding the effectiveness of

workplace learning programs, I also assessed how scholars consider the needs of frontline employees in their discussions of training evaluation methods.

Evaluating the effectiveness of workplace learning programs is a necessary function for organizational success. Kunche (2011) posited that training can be considered effective if the "training environment is favorable, material provided was good, training offered a mix of pedagogical and technological experience to deliver effective solutions, and the learning phase is evaluated by conducting tests before and after training" (p. 6). While various models allow for measuring training success within organizations, scholars' overarching conclusion is that the organization's evaluation tool must be effective and relevant for the organization and the training type evaluated.

Notably, different elements factor into identifying which tool to use. Abdul Aziz (2015) suggested that training evaluation tools must be cost-effective and mindful of the workplace learning practitioner's time and energy. This idea is relevant, as models used for evaluation are not the only consideration when identifying appropriate tools. For instance, the evaluation process must be cost-effective when selecting an evaluation tool. Additionally, the level of engagement required by a middle manager to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of workplace learning is critical. Indeed, the selected evaluation tool must not be so consuming that it deters or detracts from the middle manager's ability to perform other essential functions that keep the business moving forward.

This literature review also reveals that effective training directly correlates with organizational efficiency and the ability to achieve specific operating goals. As Tikkanen (2018) noted,

> The principal difference between the low- and high-performing countries seems to be based on the prevalence of training opportunities, where the employed persons are simply offered work-related non-formal training to a lesser extent in the low-performing countries than in the high-performing countries. (p. 526)

Tikkanen concluded that only providing team members with work-related opportunities decreases the effectiveness of the learning opportunity, as well as the company's ability to be high performing. Providing employees with a diversity of learning opportunities increases their learning engagement. Workplace learning programs are largely considered effective when employees have a voice in identifying activities that are job-specific (Wotschalk, 2020) and focused on their learning needs.

Service Delivery in Higher Education

Given the organizational context for this basic qualitative study, it was important to highlight the findings in the literature related to the service delivery of frontline employees working in higher education. This study is designed to survey middle managers overseeing frontline employees at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area. In university settings, frontline employees can be found preparing student meals in dining halls, cleaning common and residential living spaces, and executing technical functions to maintain building system performance. When faculty and administrators leave for the day or the weekend, frontline employees ensure that operations continue and customers (e.g., on-campus students) are safe, with their needs met.

Arguably, recruiting and retaining students is essential to a university's viability. The cleanliness of university facilities, the visual appearance of university common

spaces, and the maintenance of university facilities contribute to prospective students' decisions to attend a university while contributing significantly to the retention of current students. Hence, frontline employees are critical in helping universities achieve these standards of excellence through the daily tasks they are given by middle managers.

Kurniatun and Rosalin (2016) studied the impact that frontline employees have on service delivery and customer feelings of satisfaction at four universities. These researchers found that frontline employees play a pivotal role in influencing the relationship that customers (i.e., faculty, employees, students, families, and prospective families) have with the university. Hence, Kurniatun and Rosalin posited that "the focus on the customers and build[ing] relationships with customers is the key to success in business services" (p. 468).

Moreover, Wright et al. (1994) noted that "human capital can improve the firm's ability to sense changes in critical environmental variables that require changes in a firm's activities" (p. 19). Therefore, frontline employees must be consistently provided with workplace learning opportunities that support the development of the skills needed to deliver high-quality service to the universities they serve.

Hellriegel and Slocum (2011) observed, "Companies in all industries are recognizing the importance of customer satisfaction and how the quality of frontline customer service providers can make or break a company" (p. 132). Frontline employees play a pivotal, often under-recognized role in most organizations, especially in universities. In many organizations, frontline employees are the first line of both defense and offense. Specifically, frontline employees are "a differentiation source and competitive advantage for the organization and also play a key role in anticipating the

needs of consumers, adjusting service delivery, and build[ing] a rapport" (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016, p. 468) with key stakeholders. When stakeholders have a need or a question, they turn to frontline employees for the information they need. Frontline employees are expected to be knowledgeable and helpful – even outside of their specific areas of professional expertise.

In contrast, Kurniatun and Rosalin (2016) noted that a negative perception of university services provided by frontline employees can disadvantage a university's competitive standing and organizational performance. According to Kurniatun and Rosalin, "Frontline employees (FLE) have an important role in supporting the successful delivery of services. … FLE service providers' behavior especially related to the efforts to build the consumer trust and to understand the transformation mechanism from trust into loyalty in relational exchanges" (p. 468). Moreover, Kurniatun and Rosalin identified three key factors that drive personal and organizational success for frontline employees: (1) operational capability, (2) the willingness to help consumers, and (3) a problem-solving orientation.

First, operational capability describes the frontline employee's ability to reach and maintain a level of work performance that contributes to the organization's overall goals. Second, the willingness to help consumers speaks to the frontline employee's ability to have positive interactions with the university's community of stakeholders and to ensure those interactions lead these stakeholders to continue their relationships with the university. Third, a problem-solving orientation speaks to the frontline employee's ability to encounter a wide range of problems (often beyond the scope of their responsibility) and to provide a reasonable response and resolution to stakeholders. Hence, frontline

employees play a critical role in connecting university stakeholders to the university's mission, so these employees must have access to workplace learning programs that support their ongoing development.

Higher Education and Workplace Learning

Institutions of higher education have a mission that prioritizes educational opportunities for their students. However, frontline employees in higher education institutions do not benefit from the university's mission, as they are not educated similarly to other members of the university community (e.g., students and higher-skilled employees) who take advantage of available ongoing learning and skill development opportunities (e.g., tuition remission benefits). Nevertheless, universities and large service providers are organizational equivalents. Although this study seeks to understand the experiences of middle managers in the implementation of workplace learning activities, research has demonstrated that the organizational context in which they operate may influence their experiences, including the type, location, purpose, and size of the organization (i.e., the number of employees and scope of the business). Indeed, larger organizations are estimated to be more likely to dedicate resources and HR development professionals to the systematic consideration of organizational learning culture and practices (Watkins & Marsick, 1993), which must also apply to institutions of higher education.

Nonetheless, such institutions are often overlooked in "big industry" conversations. However, higher education institutions nationwide are critical to the economy and in the communities in which they exist. The District of Columbia Department of Employment Services (2023) reported eight universities (and

university-affiliated entities) among its top 20 employers. The same is true for the Washington DC regional area, including the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. Universities and university entities represent some of the top employers for both states and the District, so they significantly contribute to the labor market in this regional area, as they are responsible for creating employment opportunities. As a result, they are in a unique position to aid the professional and personal development of employees of these institutions.

The institutional mission of universities, combined with the resources they have to positively impact workplace learning for frontline employees, creates a rich environment for this study. Shifting the paradigm concerning the benefits of improved workplace learning programs has the potential to significantly impact multiple levels of the organization. As Hellriegel and Slocum (2011) aptly described, "The individual is the starting point of organizational effectiveness. Understanding the individual is crucial for enhancing individual, team, and organizational effectiveness" (p. 7). Therefore, investigating the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees has the potential to inform policies, practices, and theories for a much broader national and global audience.

This study aims to inform scholarly research and practice on the key contributions of higher education institutions in broader organizational behavior conversations. This study also seeks to highlight middle managers and their roles in higher education institutions by expanding the conversation about them beyond academic functions to operational functions. Finally, this study aims to expand an understanding of the configuration of workplace learning activities of frontline employees in institutions of higher education and how middle managers' experiences influence them.

Workplace Learning

Workplace learning is the forum through which employees, particularly frontline employees, can maintain and enhance work-related skills that help to increase performance (individual and organizational) and progress their career mobility (Kyndt et al., 2013). According to AL-Rawahi (2022), "The term 'employee training and development' refers to the process of providing workers with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their present and future positions" (p. 1). The planning, implementation, and evaluation of workplace learning within organizations are regular practices that are managed by various entities within the organization but largely implemented by middle managers (Mair, 2022). The scope of professional development spans a broad spectrum that includes technical skill-based training, soft skill and behavioral-based training, compliance-based training, and other general learning activities that can enhance employees' professional experience and expertise (ATD, 2022; Jacobs & Park, 2009).

The professional development spectrum also includes workplace learning activities that can occur outside of the department or organization or be provided by external parties (ATD, 2022). In the case of higher education, tuition remission programs provide employees the opportunity to undertake studies for little to no cost. However, employees who take advantage of these programs utilize learning benefits outside of the department-provided workplace learning programs. Similarly, local skill development centers and workforce development programs can be an external source of ongoing skill development. While these external programs can aid in skill development and job performance, the time required to attend outside of business hours, the personal cost to attend, and other competing personal factors can force employees to depend solely on

workplace learning activities that are scheduled by the organization during business hours so that compensation is not negatively impacted (Kyndt et al., 2013).

Middle managers' implementation of workplace learning activities for frontline employees is the phenomenon under observation in this study. Workplace learning provides employees with the skill development support needed to maintain performance on the job and to develop new job skills that align with the performance goals of an evolving organization (AL-Rawahi, 2022; Jacobs & Park, 2009). Workplace learning activities can include an employee shadowing or being coached by a manager as they learn how to complete a new task. These activities also include formal training settings where a facilitator (e.g., a middle manager or other leader) is present to lead an individual or a group through prepared training content. Thus, workplace learning takes on many different forms. When workplace learning is designed with all learners in mind, it can have a positive impact on employees, both personally and professionally (Billett, 1996).

Workplace Learning Background

Detailing the history of workplace learning is important to fully articulate the current state and illuminate the existing gap between the current and desired state for frontline employees. The history of workplace learning design is directly connected to the historical and ongoing development of HR development. In the 20th century, training evolved as fluctuations in society and in the economy started shifting labor needs from agriculturally based labor to machinist-based labor and then to factory-based labor (Altman, 2008). Altman (2008) described, "Educational programs in unions in the 1970s included programs to develop the whole person (including liberal arts and leisure activities), and education focused on social change through public policy" (p. 43). As

organizations and the tasks required of employees became more organized, unions began advocating to organizational leadership for more training opportunities on their behalf.

Poell et al. (2000) observed, "Both Taylorist and team-based work arrangements invite the employees to develop company-specific competencies, whereas they would profit more from developing a broad set of professional qualifications enabling them to perform work in a variety of companies" (p. 31). Workplace learning is a function of HR development that has evolved since the 20th century to support the preservation of job skills and the development of new skills as organizations and people have evolved. Workplace learning is a branch of the broader learning tree, which is also rooted in incidental and informal learning concepts. The literature affirms the workplace learning function within organizations and its value in enhancing employee and organizational performance.

Jacobs and Park (2009) grouped workplace learning into eight categories, including variations of on-site, off-site, structured and unstructured, and active and passive learning activities. Structured workplace learning (Jacobs & Park, 2009) was defined as learning activities provided by the organization and facilitated with some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher. This study focuses on understanding the experiences of the middle managers implementing structured workplace learning.

Defining Workplace Learning

Workplace learning offers a unique environment where adult learners with diverse professional and personal experiences come together to enhance employable skills identified by the organization, rather than necessarily meeting the individual's desired learning goals. Thus, formal, informal, and incidental learning experiences occur within

workplace learning experiences. Marsick et al. (2017) defined formal learning as "typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured" learning activities (p. 28). Distinguishing the formal workplace learning program from the other forms of informal and incidental learning that may occur among employees within organizations is important.

Jacobs and Park (2009) developed a conceptual framework of workplace learning that provides eight detailed levels of how it occurs. Their study identified the location of learning, the degree of planning, and the role of the trainer as the three key variables that collectively form these levels of workplace learning. Table 2 below provides a breakdown of the eight levels of workplace learning. Structured workplace learning is identified as the primary area of focus to delimit the study because this area of workplace learning is developed by the organization and requires the presence of a facilitator or trainer (Jacobs & Park, 2019).

Table 2

Levels of Structured and Unstructured Workplace Learning (Jacobs and Park, 2019)

Workplace learning level	**Description**
Off-the-job/unstructured/passive	Learning occurs away from the work setting without the use of a systems approach but with the limited involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
Off-the-job/unstructured/active	Learning occurs away from the work setting without using a systems approach but with the direct involvement of a trainer/facilitator.

Off-the-job/structured/passive	Learning occurs away from the work setting as a result of using a systems approach and with the limited involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
Off-the-job/structured/active	Learning occurs away from the work setting as a result of using a systems approach, with the direct involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
Off-the-job/unstructured/passive	Learning occurs at the actual work setting without the use of a systems approach but with limited involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
Off-the-job/unstructured/active	Learning occurs at the actual work setting without using a systems approach but with the direct involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
Off-the-job/structured/passive	Learning occurs at the actual work setting as a result of using a systems approach but with limited involvement of a trainer/facilitator.
On-the-job/structured/active	*Learning occurs at the actual work setting as a result of using a systems approach, with the direct involvement of a trainer/facilitator.*

Utilizing the definition of workplace learning provided by Jacobs and Park (2009), this study positions workplace learning as the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet the current and future work requirements.

Organizational Responsibility for Designing Inclusive Workplace Learning

The literature is consistent in highlighting the relationship between workplace learning programs, employee development, and organizational performance. More importantly, the literature emphasizes organizational responsibility for providing workplace learning that is useful to all employees (Billett, 1996). Although these ideas have been researched for many years, organizations have tended to design learning experiences to address overall workplace learning needs, as determined by organizational goals and the perspectives of organizational leaders. Organizations view investment in learning opportunities for frontline employees as a high-risk, low-return endeavor (Wotschak, 2020). Wotschalk (2020) explained, "As they [organizations] are not able to predict actual gains in productivity (due to training), they focus on groups of people, where returns to training seem high and safe" (p. 248). Thus, organizations allocate funding and resources while designing learning opportunities to meet the competency level and needs of higher-skilled employees.

Au et al. (2008) cited a lack of investment in training on an organization's part as one of the causes for human capital depreciation, which is noted as an opposite direction from development. In these scenarios, an organization may decide not to invest in developing the skills of low-skilled employees due to the large number of employees in this category. Moreover, it may consider "junior employees' duties to be routine and low-skilled" (Au et al, 2008, p. 28). Similarly, Burdett and Smith (2002, as cited in Kyndt et al., 2013) noted that the "low-skilled trap" results from fewer opportunities being provided to low-skilled workers because the expected return on workplace learning is much lower given the skill level of these team members (p. 180).

Nevertheless, Wright et al. (1994) asserted, “The firm must invest in continuing skill development of its human capital pool, ... administering a variety of training aimed at increasing and maintaining each individual’s job-related skills, and providing development opportunities for individuals which broaden their skill base” (p. 24). However, some organizations do not value the contributions of frontline employees as much as those of other employee populations. This lack of investment in the development of frontline employees perpetuates a cycle of stalled progress for both employees and the overall progress of the organization. Organizational policies and procedures drive the design of workplace learning programs and the subsequent availability of learning opportunities for frontline employees. Therefore, organizations must reframe their workplace learning practices to be inclusive and intentional in creating space for all employees to thrive in workplace learning activities, especially for frontline employees.

Bridging the Gap Between Organizations and Their Frontline Employees

The literature affirms that the learning needs of frontline employees are unique and should be considered intentionally when designing workplace learning programs to be inclusive and available to this employee population (Billett, 1996; Rose, 2000; Russ-Eft, 2002). The literature review reveals two primary organizational issues: (1) striking a balance between employee motivation and the availability of learning opportunities and (2) increasing the consideration of employee learning needs by creating forums for feedback and for employee “voice” to be heard by the organization (Kyndt et al., 2013; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017). These two issues reiterate the necessity for organizations to examine processes and procedures that may be counterproductive to the desired workplace learning program.

As noted by Merriam and Bierema (2014), organizational policies and procedures guide middle managers in creating learning opportunities in conjunction with the organization's strategic plan and goals. As a result of this restriction in the design process, workplace learning programs do not always meet the needs of specific learners. The disconnect between the program content and learner interest can create a "pile-on" sentiment on the part of frontline employees who already feel the burden of participation. As Kyndt et al. (2013) described, "Due to the educational failures that low-qualified employees have often experienced, their intention to participate in any kind of formal learning activity is rather low" (p. 192).

Beyond the challenges presented to the organization by frontline employees, organizational policies and procedures create additional challenges to the workplace learning design. According to Silvennoinen and Nori (2017), "Often low motivation for learning and training can be traced to organizational practices and structures" (p. 186). Moreover, according to Kyndt et al. (2013), "Just increasing the number of opportunities will not suffice when the goal is raising the participation in learning activities of low-qualified employees' attitudes towards participation should also change" (p. 180). Impacts felt by frontline employees required to participate in workplace learning activities also impact the middle managers who are responsible for implementing them.

Furthermore, Mikkonen et al. (2017) noted that the pedagogical practices of organizations are "heterogeneous and oftentimes incoherent" (p. 2). When the methods for delivering workplace learning do not align with the needs of the employees, the participation and effectiveness in the learning activity decline. Wotschalk (2020) stated, "Voice is understood as the medium that converts training opportunities into training

outcomes, by enabling workers to express and claim their training interests" (p. 246). When organizations create opportunities for employee feedback in the workplace learning design process, their engagement (or at least perceived engagement) increases their intention and motivation to actively participate in the workplace learning program.

As demonstrated by Kurniatun and Rosalin (2016), a frontline employee's ability to meet stakeholder expectations is a critical element in a university's organizational performance. Having the technical skills and competencies to deliver high-quality services sustainably is the responsibility of the university to support. Per Wright et al. (1994),

> While it is true that an individual or an elite group of individuals may create temporary competitive advantage, we argue that a more likely source of competitive advantage is the larger pool of human capital that constitutes the entire organization. (p. 17)

Hence, investment in workplace learning provides competitive advantage for institutions of higher education because it allows frontline employees to enhance their skills, which directly connects to service delivery and overall organizational performance.

Therefore, this qualitative research study aims to further the understanding of the methods utilized by middle managers within higher education institutions to support employee job skill development. The findings of this qualitative research study seek to inform theory and practice related to the needed forms of workplace learning to best align with frontline employee needs.

Summary

This literature review detailed four key components (i.e., human capital theory, middle managers, frontline employees, and workplace learning) related to the

development of the research question, conceptual framework, and the research methodology for this study. These four components support the justification for this and future studies to understand how middle managers make sense of the institutional practices and procedures that influence the workplace learning design process and impact development opportunities for frontline employees. Organizations often create workplace learning programs without considering the unique learning needs of those in marginalized populations: namely, frontline employees (Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017). Additional research can support the need to address the disparities in workplace learning program design and its effectiveness for frontline employees.

As demonstrated by Harris (2000), the historical and current landscape of workplace learning is so broad that its implications for organizations and their employees can have an even broader reach. Johansen and Hawes (2016) explained, "Good management of human capital provides the organization with well-trained, qualified, and effective workers, which in turn leads to better performance" (p. 594). Therefore, understanding the evaluation methodologies and tools available to assist organizations with assessing their workplace learning programs is critical. As work and research progress to understand the effectiveness of workplace learning in general, specifically for frontline employees, an evaluation tool is necessary to allow researchers to hone in on the unique and specific learning needs of frontline employees. Having a broad understanding of the evaluation landscape is useful, while creating a conceptual framework that can be applied over time in future research studies is necessary. Chapter 3 details the research study methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

According to Merriam and Tisdale (2016), "Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 23). This basic interpretive qualitative research study was designed to explore the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area. Semi-structured interviews, site observations, and a review of organizational documents provided the data for this study. This chapter includes an overview of the research methodology, research question, the process to ensure trustworthiness, and the ethical precautions employed to protect human participants.

Rationale for the Research Study

To build the foundation for this study, an assessment of empirical literature that focused on middle managers, workplace learning, and frontline employees was conducted. Multiple bodies of literature were used to conceptualize the relationship between middle managers, frontline employees, the organization, and the practices that inform workplace learning design. Middle managers should play a key role in the implementation of workplace learning for their frontline teams (Harding et al., 2014, Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Yang, 2010). "Middle managers occupy a central position in organizational hierarchies, where they are responsible for implementing senior management plans by ensuring junior staff fulfill their roles" (Harding et al., 2014, p.1213). Understanding the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning will aid scholars and practitioners in creating policies and practices to support

the organizational leaders responsible for addressing the workplace learning needs of frontline employees.

Frontline employees present unique learning challenges in workplace learning environments and therefore workplace learning design requires a different level of intentionality for frontline employees (Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017). Human capital theory (Au et al., 2008; Becker 1976; Nafukho et al., 2004) suggests that investing in the development of human capital can yield benefits to the employee and also to the organization. Wright & Snell (2001) also advocated for the investment in human capital development, while noting that the strain on human capital and material resources are a constant pain point for organizations, especially for higher education institutions (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). To help organizations pivot to be able to better support the workplace learning needs for frontline employees, middle managers must be positioned within the organization and have the resources needed to implement workplace learning activities that takes these needs into consideration. To further support the understanding of the learning needs for frontline employees, contributions from Billett (1996), Russ-Eft (2002), and Jacobs and Park (2009) provided critical typologies for building an inclusive workplace learning program.

Workplace learning programs, particularly those in institutions of higher education, are not meeting the developmental needs of their employees or the aims of the institutions that identifies as a place of learning (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). "Educational opportunities sponsored by business and industry; indeed, all workplace training and educational programs are in the service of the business, and education is a secondary concern" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 16). The empirical literature review

completed for this study affirmed my assumption that organizations will generally prioritize learning opportunities that yield outcomes for the organization, before they consider investing in learning opportunities that support each employee's developmental needs. Scholars and practitioners are aligned on the positive effects that investment in workplace learning can have on employees' development professionally and personally. From the perspective of human capital theory, both Maringe (2015) and Carniero et al. (2010) argued that it is the institutional investment in employee development that yields long term positive results for the organization and for the employees, which supports the justification for this study.

The basic qualitative research methodology was selected to allow me to fully capture the experience of research participants through their "account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). Additionally, capturing data through site observations and a review of institutional documents allowed me to triangulate the data collected through this research study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). This research study was essential to obtain the data that will inform the current gap in empirical literature related to middle manager's role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees and to support the development and implementation of workplace learning practices for frontline employee populations working in institutions of higher education and other organizations.

Research Question

The research question is a critical element to every step of a research study. To achieve the best data collection results, research questions should be "open-ended, evolving, and

non-directional" (Creswell, 2013, p. 138). The research question for this study was developed through a review of empirical literature related to the research topic. The research question guiding this study was: "How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?" Study participants responded to the interview protocol (Appendix G) which included questions in four different topic areas related to their experiences as middle managers engaging with and implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Interview participants responded to questions in the following categories: their direct engagement with employees, their understanding of employee learning needs, and any practices (e.g., processes or procedures) related to implementing workplace learning.

Checklists were developed from the literature review for this study, to guide and capture notes from the site observations (Appendix H) and document review (Appendix I). Similar to the interview protocol, the checklists prompted me to ask specific questions of myself and of the interview participant guiding the site observation at each university and to look for specific details in reviewing the documents provided by each university that were relevant to addressing the research question. Semi-structured interviews, site observations, and a review of organizational documentation provided me with a comprehensive view of the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. The four literature streams that were central to developing the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study

are Middle Managers, Workplace Learning, Frontline Employees, and Human Capital Theory. This section provides a breakdown of the basis of each of these streams of literature and how they contribute to the conceptualization of the research question. The study of workplace learning commenced in the 20th century, as the content of workplace training evolved to support the shift from agriculturally based labor, to machinist-based labor, to factory-based labor (Altman, 2008). The literature review in Chapter 2 identified studies focused on workplace learning, training and development, and organizational learning. These studies captured a wide range of workplace learning elements including the impact of training on organizational and individual performance, employee motivation to participate in workplace learning, and the effectiveness of workplace learning. Studies about frontline employee demographics, frontline employee contributions to the service industry, and frontline employees need for customized workplace learning were also identified.

Similarly, the identity of middle managers, the role of middle managers in implementing organizational objectives, and driving organizational performance has been studied and was reviewed for inclusion in this study's literature review. Each of these factors working together contributes significantly to an organization's overall ability to implement organizational directives and reach performance goals. Even though these factors contributing to the literature review have been studied from multiple angles for many years, the correlation between the role of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, specifically in higher education operations, has not been studied. Although this study sought to understand the role middle managers play in the implementation of workplace learning, the organizational context in which

they are operating can influence their practices. Universities and university entities are represented in the top employers for the Washington DC regional area, making them significant contributors to the labor market in this regional area; responsible for creating employment opportunities for the region and as a result being in a unique position to aid in the professional and personal development of employees of these institutions.

Mair (2002) and Pugh et al. (1968) detailed the relationship between the organization, middle managers, and their frontline employees. Organizations provide directives that are disseminated to middle managers, who are then responsible for interpreting the directives into actions that can be carried out by frontline employees (Mair, 2002). As organizations evolve, the directives of the organization are modified creating a need for reskilling and upskilling (AL-Rawahi, 2022). In this case, workplace learning is the vehicle through which these skills are translated to the frontline employees.

Utilizing a conceptual model similar to the model designed for this study, Yang et al. (2010) depicted the effect of middle manager transformational leadership on frontline employee performance. "The internal cascading influence of middle managers' transformational leadership behaviour found in this study seems to support their strategic (upward focus) and operational (downward focus) roles in large organizations (Yang et al., 2010, p.672). Further justifying the design of the conceptual and theoretical model for this study, the study conducted by Yang et al. (2010), concluded that senior leaders do not directly influence employee performance and that middle manager proximity (physical, functional, or psychological) to frontline employees is critical in translating organizational goals into performance outcomes. To this end, Yang et al. (2010) urged

organizations and senior leaders to ensure that middle managers are aware of their influence on the frontline employees, and that they should ensure that middle managers have adequate empowerment and training.

Given the breadth of the problem that was identified in the development of this study, there are connections that can be made to many theories in economics, learning, human resources, and organizational development. Through the literature review process for this study, Human Capital Theory and the Human Resources View of Resource-Based Theory have emerged to underpin the design of the study. “Human Capital Theory assumes that investment in education is necessary to acquire skills and training, which in turn will increase individual capital” (Robinson & Pope, 2023, p. 245). While the Human Resources View of Resource-Based Theory (Wright et al., 1994) assumes that human capital is the resource that most contributes to an organization's ability to achieve its performance goals. As depicted in Figure 2, these theoretical views support the perceived relationship between middle managers' role in implementing workplace learning practices and the associated outcomes of organizational and employee performance.

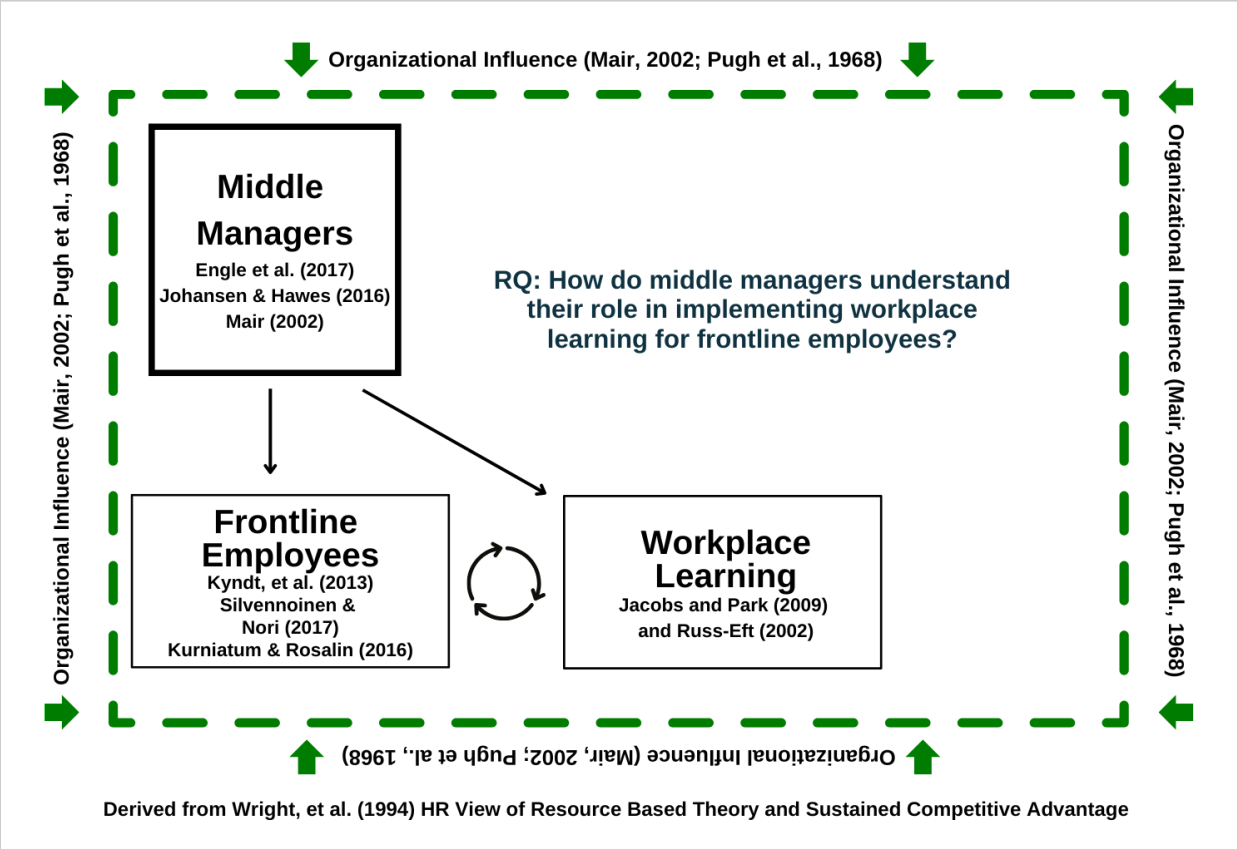
Figure 2 amplifies the dynamism of the relationship between the organization, middle managers and frontline employees, with workplace learning as a contributing factor to performance outcomes for the organization and the employee. The dotted green line around the perimeter of the images represents the organizational boundary and influences (Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968) on each of the relational elements of the conceptual framework (e.g., middle managers, frontline employees, and workplace learning). Middle managers are positioned above the other relational elements of the conceptual framework to represent their position within the organization as an

intermediary (Engle et al., 2017; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002) receiving organizational directives from senior leadership and interpreting those directives into tasks for frontline employees. Frontline employees are represented below middle managers demonstrating their position in the reporting relationship (Kyndt et al., 2013; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017; Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016).

The two arrows branching off middle managers represents the influence middle managers have in leading frontline employees and in developing workplace learning activities (Engle et al., 2017; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002). The circle between frontline employees and workplace learning represents the cyclical relationship between employees and their ongoing need for workplace learning (Jacobs & Park, 2009). Although the correlation between workplace learning activities and performance outcomes were not evaluated as part of this study, both theoretical constructs underpinning this study imply that performance outcomes are the final step in the process, when assessing frontline employee performance improvement as a result of workplace learning (Barney, 1991; Becker, 1962; Wright et al., 1994). Performance outcomes are not visually represented in the conceptual framework.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework for this study was modified throughout the research study to ensure each of the elements highlighted by the research problem were properly represented visually. This conceptual framework allowed me to trace back any questions I had, as I worked with my committee to finalize the interview protocol, document review checklist, and site observation checklist. Throughout the data analysis process, I was also able to reference the conceptual framework as a roadmap for interpreting the relevance of data collected.

Researcher Positionality Statement

Qualitative researchers have an obligation to develop a thorough representation of the research problem, interpret multiple perspectives through the research study, and tell a story of the bigger picture that emerges from the study (Creswell, 2013). I previously held a professional role focusing on employee development within a higher education institution, in Washington DC for more than a decade. As an executive in this role, I was able to observe the university's approach to developing workplace learning opportunities for its employees, including frontline employees. I observed the problem of practice while supporting workplace learning activities for frontline employees.

My background, biases, and assumptions directly informed the investigation of literature that led to the development of the research question that guided this study. Semi-structured interviewing and the practicing of journaling (Creswell, 2013) were utilized to ensure that any perceived relationship that I have to the study topic, participants, and research sites did not interfere with the validity of the study. In the interviews, I was intentional to create an environment where interview participants felt comfortable adding and interjecting their own experiences without much guidance from me, which made the interviews more conversational and interactive. Many interview participants were mindful to share specific examples that they believed to help them demonstrate a point that they may have been passionate about making. Similarly, during site observations, the interview participants that took me around their campuses were intentional to point out training rooms or other areas that they believed provided details that supported my research question.

I made journal notes during interviews, at the conclusion of each interview, during site observations, during the data analysis process, and while writing chapters 4 and 5. Journaling was both a relief of anxiety that I suppressed during the interviews and a reminder of the many reflections that surfaced during this research study. I captured notes about interview participants' demeanor, apparent, and obscure reactions to interview participants' responses to the interview questions. I made note of ideas during data collection that highlighted what I wanted to remember to review during the data analysis process.

In the process of cleaning and coding interview transcripts and reviewing notes from site observations and document reviews, I revisited my journal notes to remind myself of points that I wanted to explore further or that felt important to highlight through coding. Clarke (2021) suggested that researchers,

> Try to unpack the assumptions that you are making as you are reacting to the data and noticing things in the data. Ask yourself what's familiar, what's unfamiliar, surprising. Try to reflect on why you are reacting to the data that way (10:08).

I followed this line of inquiry as I worked through phases 1-5 of Thematic Analysis in a reflexive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2022). I utilized notes from my journal in the process of writing and editing the final version of this dissertation. I maintained regular communication with my dissertation advisor throughout the data collection and analysis processes to ensure researcher subjectivity was accounted for and that the research process remained reflexive (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Creswell (2009) defined worldview as the "general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (Creswell, 2009, p. 6). This study is

grounded in the social constructivist worldview. The social constructivist view supports a qualitative research design because it allows for a research process where "participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). In the social constructivist worldview, the researcher and the research participant co-construct meaning from their individual histories, cultural norms, and life experiences (Creswell, 2009). Further, a qualitative study allows the researcher to conduct the process of inquiry in the specific context in which they work and that allows the inquiry process to "address the processes of interaction among individuals" (Creswell, 2009, p.8). The utilization of site observations for this study supported the co-construction of the themes and findings for this study by yielding rich and deep data that was considered alongside the interview and institutional document review data. The data collected during the observations significantly shaped the findings of this study by affirming and in some cases, challenging the accounts of the study participants. Without that data, the study findings may have been different. By studying the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, I was able to explore the dynamics that exist for middle managers translating organizational objectives to their frontline employees and their perspectives on supporting their employee's ability to develop the skills necessary, through workplace learning, to comply with these objectives.

Research Site

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023), degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States of America generated a revenue of $996B in AY20-21; which is comparable to other industry titans and therefore

validates the utilization of colleges and universities as a research site and criteria for this basic qualitative research study. Institutions of higher education were selected for this study because in the District of Columbia alone, these institutions play a critical role in the economy and communities in which they exist. The District of Columbia Department of Employment Services (DC DOES, 2023) reports eight universities (and university affiliated entities) in the top twenty private employers in the District. The same is true for the Washington DC regional area, including the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. Universities and university entities are represented in the top private employers for both states and the District, making them significant contributors to the labor market in this regional area. Thus, making these institutions responsible for creating employment opportunities for the region and as a result, being in a unique position to aid in the professional and personal development of employees of these institutions.

This research study was conducted at four universities in the Washington DC regional area. The study was open to participants at 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities. All 4 universities represented in this study are 4-year, private universities. Table 4 provides further context on each of the research sites. The four universities have employee populations ranging from approximately 1,600 employees to more than 10,000 employees. Similarly, the four universities have comparable student populations, with each school having more than 10,000 students. Although the universities represented in this study have similarities, I did not solicit interview participants according to their employer. Interview participants self-identified for this study which is what determined university representation.

Table 4

Summary of Research Site Context

Sites	Number of Employees	Number of Students	Data Collection Methods at Site
Site 1	10,000+	20,000+	Interview, Site Observation, Document Review
Site 2	6,000+	25,000+	Interview, Site Observation, Document Review
Site 3	1,600+	13,000+	Interview, No Site Observation (Photo of Team Training Space Provided), Document Review
Site 4	7,400+	13,000+	Interview, Site Observation, No Document Review (Organizational Chart Provided)

Participant Selection and Demographics

This study explored the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees at higher education institutions in the Washington DC regional area. Semi-structured interviews were necessary to allow study participants to speak to their experiences related to the study's research question (Creswell, 2013). To achieve this goal, study participants were required to meet four criteria that were developed through the literature review process and are included in Table 5. Study participants were employed as a middle manager, currently overseeing the work of frontline employees, responsible for implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees, and working at a higher education institution (2-year college or 4-year university) located in the Washington DC regional area.

Table 5

Summary of Participant Study Criteria

Participant Study Criteria	Definition
Employed as a Middle Manager	"...the direct supervisors of the workers in their unit and are responsible for hiring, evaluation, and improvement of those workers" (Johansen & Hawes, 2016, p. 593). "Staff with a supervisory capacity other than senior leaders (e.g., department managers, program managers, nurse managers, administrative directors, frontline supervisors)" (Engle et al., 2017, p.16) "Middle Managers are organization members who link the activities of vertically related groups and who are responsible for at least sub-functional work flow, but not the work flow of the organization as a whole." (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997, p.472)
Currently overseeing frontline employees	Frontline Employees are defined by this study as: Employees of a higher education institution, working in a direct, service-delivery capacity (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). These roles often have direct interaction with university stakeholders such as students, staff, and other key members of the university community. Frontline employees are essential workers who provide critical trade services. "The critical trades sector is composed of professionals trained in any number of key services that are critical to keeping homes, offices and other buildings operating. Just some of the professions that can be considered a part of this sector include electricians, plumbers, HVAC technicians, wastewater treatment plant operators, exterminators and many others." (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021, p. 9)
Responsible for implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees	Workplace Learning activities are defined by this study as: "the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet the current and future work requirements" (Jacobs & Park, 2009, p.134)

	Also referred to as training and development, which "refers to the process of providing workers with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their present and future positions" (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p.1). Further, training and development should be "seen as the organizational resource that aids in the acquisition, inference, and application of knowledge by workers" (AL-Rawahi, 2022, p.1).
Working at a 2-year college or 4-year university located in the Washington DC regional area	The geographic boundaries for this study included the Washington DC Regional area, more specifically, Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Middle managers working at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area were included in this study.

Although the outcomes of this study were not dependent on individual demographics, I was able to collect relevant participant demographics through the pre-interview questionnaire and the first interview cadence. A total of 17 study participants consisted of 5 women and 12 men. Table 6 provides the breakdown of the study participants by job level, area of university operations represented, and a summary of the official titles of study participants. All study participants hold a college degree or a technical license. Participants noted managing frontline teams ranging in size from 5 to 400+. All of the study participants are employed by a 4-year university in the Washington DC regional area. Finally, 15 of the 17 of the study participants reported not directly managing a budget for workplace learning activities.

Table 6

Distribution of Study Participants by Job Classification

Number of Participants By Level	Area of University Operations	Participant Official Title
2 Executive Chefs	Culinary, university dining	Executive Chef
8 Director Level	University Facilities - trades and custodial operations	Executive Director, Director, Assistant Director
2 Workplace Learning Managers	Human Resources and Environmental Health and Safety	Assistant Director
3 Manager Level	University Facilities - trades and custodial operations	Manager
2 Team Leads	University Facilities - trades and custodial operations	Team Lead

Creswell notes that a purposeful sampling strategy for a qualitative research study "will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 147). To identify participants for this study, I directly emailed my site authorization request (Appendix B) to the Human Resources and Operations Departments for colleges and universities in the Washington DC regional area. I requested distribution of the participant recruitment email (Appendix C) to individuals that met the participant criteria. I also solicited interview participants utilizing the IRB approved announcement (Appendix D) through social media, doctoral student networks, and other academic networking groups. Study participants self-identified for the study and were emailed the pre-interview questionnaire to confirm their qualification for the study. Participants scheduled their own interviews using the Calendly scheduling tool. Snowball sampling was also utilized by asking study participants to invite other participants who met the study qualifications to participate. Over a period of 45 days, 24 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study

and the study concluded with 17 study participants, representing four universities in the Washington DC regional area.

Data Collection Methods

In a basic qualitative study, "Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis" (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 24). Creswell (2013) articulated that data for qualitative studies is best gathered through interviews as the primary form of data gathering; while document reviews, observations, and other forms of data support the stories told by research participants. "In this strategy, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). As set forth through the Institutional Review Board of The George Washington University, this basic qualitative study called for 15-20 middle managers employed by higher education institutions in the Washington DC regional area to be interviewed. To make certain research study participants had a similar organizational context (Creswell, 2013), research participants worked at an institution of higher education as a middle manager, overseeing frontline employees who work primarily in service delivery functions, as defined in Table 5. To align with this criteria, interview participants self-identified in the pre-interview questionnaire that they held service delivery roles in university facilities (operations or trades), university dining, environmental health and safety, and human resources.

To ensure purposeful sampling methods were utilized (Creswell, 2013), a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix E) was used to identify and confirm participants met the criteria for study participation. 24 individuals inquired about participation in the

study. 19 participants completed the pre-interview questionnaire and scheduled interviews through the Calendly scheduling tool. One participant was identified as not meeting the participant criteria because their role was assistant vice president and they are considered a senior leader by the criteria (Engle et al., 2017; Floyd & Wooldridge 1997) utilized for this study and detailed in Table 5. One participant requested to reschedule their interview, but did not reschedule and did not respond to follow up correspondence that I sent. Five of the individuals that expressed initial interest in participating in the study did not respond to correspondence that I sent to follow up to their initial inquiry. 17 participants self-identified, scheduled interviews, and completed the interview process for this study. Each study participant received a copy of the informed consent package (Appendix F) and provided verbal consent to participate in the interview and to be recorded.

A total of 17, 1-hour, semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. The goal of the semi-structured interview process was to collect data about the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees to inform the research study. Each interview was conducted according to the interview protocol (Appendix G). Five of the interviews were conducted virtually, by video conference on the Zoom software. At the conclusion of each interview, I captured reflections and feelings in a journal to maintain subjectivity. Twelve of the interviews were conducted on-site and in-person. All of the interviews were audio recorded through the Zoom software. Following the interviews, the audio files were uploaded to Scribie to be transcribed.

In my journal notes, I reflected on the general feeling of rushing that each in-person study participant came into the interviews with. Interview participants seemed to always be rushing in from something or needing to rush off to the next thing. Several interview participants requested to abbreviate their interview because something had come up that created an unexpected conflict. Although we were able to still get through all of the interview questions, it still created an uneasiness for me in an effort to be mindful of their time. One interview was broken into two shorter 30-minute interviews because the interview participant received a call during the interview that required them to step away while the interview was in progress. Phone notifications were a common distraction during the interviews. Given the emergency nature of the work of interview participants, I did not feel comfortable asking participants to mute their phones, turn their phones off, or to disregard the notifications as they came in. Respecting their reality was important to me as a researcher, but also magnified the high-volume nature of their work and the importance it carries in daily operations. Their organizations, peers, employees, and customers depend on them to be responsive throughout the business day and this research study could not interrupt that.

The site observations played a key role in the data analysis process. By allowing me to see for myself the context that study participants existed in regularly, the site observations illuminated social cues and provided a level of depth to the data that enhanced the analysis of the interviews and the review of institutional documents. When analyzing the data, I did not have to infer meaning, I was able to draw from my own observations from co-existing with study participants (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The site observations also yielded better interpretation of the meaning of written messages in the

review of institutional documents, that I would not have had access to, if I had only conducted virtual interviews. I am certain that without the incorporation of the site observations, the outcomes of this study may have been different. The site observations gave way to the very rich, fluid, and detailed experiences of study participants.

While I was on-site, I could sense the reluctance of some interview participants to participate. As they settled into the interview room, I assured them of the confidentiality associated with the interview and created space for them to ask any questions they had before we got started. One middle manager stopped by in between interviews to inquire about what was going on. I explained that I was on-site to conduct interviews for my research study and I shared the criteria for the interview. He said that he had not received the notification from HR regarding signing up for the interview and expressed concern about why he had been excluded from the process. He said that he believed he was intentionally left off of the distribution email. Because I did not send the notifications out directly, I could not speak to why he would not have been included in the request for an interview. I shared the informed consent package and scheduling tool with this middle manager and they scheduled an interview. Had I not been on-site, I would not have had an interaction with this interview participant that indicated a distrust for leadership within the university.

At each of the in-person interview sites, I had an overwhelming sense that people wanted to be seen, heard, and understood as the interview process unfolded. After an interview, I made a note in my journal asking if the interview participants had ever been asked for their opinions before. Being able to interview participants in-person elevated the data collection experience for me as a researcher, but also I believe for the interview

participants. I was able to observe the interview participants navigating the context of their workplace. The in-person interviews allowed for a level of familiarity that the Zoom interviews did not allow. Because I was able to observe the interview participants body language and mannerisms, I was able to offer more adjustments from the set up of the room, to the tone of my voice, and the frequency of my follow up questions that I do not believe I was able to do in the virtual Zoom interviews.

Many interview participants appeared eager to share their professional experiences as a contribution to research. Stories from interview participants, provided as examples, demonstrated the high levels of pride they take in their work. I learned that an interview participant had previously been a high school physical education teacher and made a pivot into operations after several years of teaching. I also learned that one of the interview participants had a completely different profession before moving to the United States. These anecdotal details that came out in the in-person interviews were critical in helping me to synthesize the three data sources for this qualitative research study.

Upon completion of the transcription process, a copy of the interview transcript was provided to study participants to review and confirm accuracy. Fifteen participants confirmed accuracy. Two participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts, but they had additional questions about the study. One participant had questions about the future use of the data collected during the interview. In an email, I reiterated the language from the informed consent package (Appendix F) which noted that audio recordings would be destroyed at the completion of the dissertation and that interview transcripts would be stored for up to 3 years. Another study participant had broader questions about the anticipated outcomes of the study. In an email, I provided responses to their questions

about the study and I shared a few scholarly articles to help inform their understanding of the dissertation process and my study topic. I confirmed that both study participants were comfortable moving forward after that additional information had been provided.

Document Review

To supplement the semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013), I conducted a review of institutional documents to better understand the flow of communication related to workplace learning at an organizational level and between middle managers and their frontline employees. The review of institutional documents provided me with greater insight into how middle managers communicate to their employees about workplace learning opportunities and where communication for workplace learning is available. These documents also provided greater organizational context to supplement what middle managers reported in the interviews. Through the informed consent package and also through communication with interview participants, I requested a copy of training content, written communication (email, text message, memo, other form of communication) between study participants and their employees, or other workplace learning materials related to past or upcoming workplace learning activities. Documents were provided for the document review by interview participants that self-identified to participate in this study. The documents were not specific to the sites themselves.

At Site 1, two participants provided a total of nine documents at the conclusion of their interviews. At Site 2, the senior leader that approved my site visit asked their administrator to share their standard operating procedure (SOP) documents with me. A total of 30 SOP documents were shared with me. 3 of 30 SOP documents were included in the document review process because they were directly related to workplace learning

for frontline employees. The remaining 27 documents were excluded from the data set due to lack of relevance to the study. Four additional documents were provided by one study participant at Site 2 at the conclusion of their interview. At Site 3, two documents were provided by two participants (one document each) at the conclusion of their interviews. At Site 4, the study participant provided an organizational chart, but declined to provide additional documents due to their time constraints and a need to return to their work following the interview and site observation.

An assessment of organizational documents requires the researcher to maintain the same level of awareness as an interview, by being mindful of the context the documents were generated in and how they were provided to the researcher (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). It was imperative that I assessed the authenticity and accuracy of the documents before integrating document review notes into the coding process. Upon review of the documents provided, 6 codes were identified and included in the process of developing themes. Organizational charts were provided by all four of the universities represented in this study. An assessment of the organizational charts confirmed three things: that the study participants were middle managers based on where their role was located in the organizational structure (Harding et al., 2014), that the study participants were responsible for overseeing frontline employees who service the entire university community, and that the operational units represented by the study participants were responsible for providing operational services to the entire university (Kuriatun & Rosalin, 2016).

Two onboarding training documents outlined processes that should be completed on an employee's first days in a new role. Relevant to this study are the systems and

process training that was included as part of that onboarding process document. The systems and process training included in the onboarding documents represented an example of structured workplace learning for frontline employees because the training is designed for a frontline employee to be facilitated by a middle manager. Through the interviews, study participants at all four universities represented in the study confirmed that new employee orientation is a consistent structured workplace learning requirement for new employees. Additionally, a powerpoint presentation was provided that included annual kitchen training plans. This document detailed procedures for day-to-day work expectations including safety protocols, meal prep and presentation, and proper waste management procedures. All of the training materials were provided in English, even though the study participant that provided the documents did confirm through the interview process that materials are often translated for team members who do not speak or read English as their first language. These documents provided clarity into how middle managers communicate about workplace learning activities with their frontline employees.

In mechanized work environments (Altman, 2008; Peterson, 2006), where daily work tasks are consistent or repetitive, organizations establish standard operating procedures (SOP) as a training tool for new employees and as a process reminder for existing employees of the appropriate way to complete a process or respond to an issue. Middle managers at each of the sites referenced the use of SOP's in connection with their work. The submission of 30 SOP's by Site 2 demonstrates the commonality and frequency of the use of SOP's by university operations teams. Within university operations (specifically the facilities trades and culinary operations featured in this

study), there are operating guidelines or codes that have to be followed for safety purposes and to remain in compliance with regulations that govern the industry. The study participants at this university confirmed that there is no formal training process for these standard operating procedures, illuminating a gap in communication and work expectations for frontline employees. It is a disservice and potentially a safety hazard for middle managers and frontline employees to be held to work expectations detailed in these SOP's without being trained on what is expected.

Study participants confirmed through the interview process that they use a variety of communication methods (text reminders, meetings, and face-to-face communication) to inform and remind their frontline employees about upcoming workplace learning opportunities. Three draft emails were provided for the document review that provided the logistical details, learning goals, and other resources associated with the workplace learning activity. The email templates were written in English with no alternative language translation for frontline employees who do not utilize English as their primary language. Study participants reported using other means of communication to ensure their employees were receiving messages that may have been sent by email because frontline employees spend the majority of their day on the worksite and not in a place to be able to check email. Additionally, study participants reported working directly with frontline employees to ensure they can access any training materials and resources shared in email, by printing the resources and making them available in their team and locker room.

Newsletters were described by study participants as a means for communicating pertinent information about upcoming workplace learning opportunities to frontline employees. Two newsletters were provided which included a list of learning opportunities

that employees could participate in. The newsletter included links to virtual training conducted by Zoom and asynchronous online training that is available through LinkedIn Learning. Similar to communicating workplace learning opportunities by email, newsletters were drafted and distributed in English for a workforce that has employees with a different primary language. Reviewing newsletters also requires regular access to email to which study participants confirmed, frontline employees do not have throughout the work day, making this an ineffective way to share workplace learning reminders and information with frontline employees.

Site Observations

Further, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the workplace learning landscape at each of the universities, I conducted a site observation of employee workspaces, team huddle, training rooms, computer labs, kitchen front of house serving and back of house prep areas, and conference rooms at three of four universities. Creswell (2013) noted that researchers observing physical settings should use the research questions to guide the observation. By participating as a ‘non-participant observer', I did not directly engage in the workplace learning activities. I completed a site observation checklist during each site observation. I captured personal reactions to the site observations by taking notes in my journal at the completion of each site observation.

The site-observations provided me further clarity around how middle managers and their respective universities support the development of their employees, utilize the physical space for workplace learning activities, and also how the staff interactions within the workspace occur. Site observations were restricted according to each university’s authorization to visit related workspaces. Table 7 provides the details of the spaces

observed at each site. I was asked not to photograph employees engaged in workplace learning activities in the computer rooms (site 2) and on the kitchen line (sites 1 & 4). At Site 4, I was not permitted to photograph spaces when employees were present, which forced me to rely heavily on notes made on the site observation checklist and in my journal. Site 3 declined a site observation and provided a photo of their training and team facilities.

Table 7

Overview of Site Observation Details

Sites	Overview of Site Observation (Spaces and Activities)
Site 1	Controls Team Huddle Room, Adjacent Conference/Training Room, Kitchen, Locker Room
Site 2	Training Room, Team Huddle/Breakroom, Team Workspaces, Computer Training Room, Locker Room, Conference Room, Administrative Building
Site 3	Photo provided of team room and training facility
Site 4	Team huddle area, Training Room, Locker Room, Kitchen

Table 8 captures my reflections of on-site observations of three sites and of the photo provided of the fourth. Observations are separated into three categories: observation of leadership meetings, space layout for team and training spaces, and staff interactions. Upon completion of site observations, 11 codes were identified and included in the process of developing themes.

Table 8

Summary of Researcher Site Observations

Observation	**Researcher Observations**
Leadership Meetings	● Meetings are occurring all day long in conference rooms and private offices adjacent to team rooms. Different groups of people are in and out of these meeting rooms all day. I was invited to sit in two leadership meetings and my observations about those meetings are below: ● Too many agenda items for the allotted time - resulting in rushed discussions and decision making ● Each agenda item related back to a need for training for the frontline teams or to a training that had occurred and had not resulted in the desired outcomes ● Consistent reference to the SOPs as a baseline of organizational knowledge ● The most senior leader in the room definitely had the gravitational pull of power when it came to decision making related to workplace learning activities ● Despite creating space for the other leaders in the room to weigh in on decisions, they consistently deferred to the most senior leader for the final decision ● A sense of caution or trepidation in how the room of leaders engaged with the most senior leader ● The leaders were in position to make a decision on an upcoming training for their frontline teams - there was group pressure for the leaders to make a hasty decision without using any evaluation criteria for the decision - this decision which will impact hundreds of frontline team members was not treated like a priority and lack of time in meeting to properly evaluate this decision
Layout and Setup of Training and Team Spaces	● Culinary teams have a locker room set up and do not have a dedicated gathering space - these teams gather in the kitchen or in the dining area adjacent to the kitchen ● Operations team spaces were generally well kept, each team member doesn't have an assigned desk, workspace, computer, but they do have an assigned locker within or adjacent to the team space ● Training space observations ○ Some training rooms were disheveled and not

	prepared for training participants to arrive ○ Some training rooms were underground or in parts of the building that did not have natural lighting and and or they were poorly lit ■ One training and team room did have windows, which allowed for natural light ○ Training rooms were generally small and did not have enough seating for the average team - the same was true for training rooms with computers, there were not enough computer terminals for the average team ● Technology is limited specifically in team and training spaces, most are not equipped with video conferencing capabilities eliminating the opportunity for synchronous or asynchronous, virtual trainings and meetings ● Screens are consistently mounted throughout training and team spaces - interviews detailed that these screens can be used for the teams to watch training videos or to complete asynchronous training as a group ● Signage on walls provides safety reminders and short instructional tips for regular operating procedures ● Screens in common areas display team culture elements (birthdays, latest news, etc.), useful info about upcoming training and meetings, messaging and short instructional tutorials ● Absence of the presence of senior leadership in frontline employee workspaces or training spaces
Staff Interactions	● Team members are always on the move - dashing from one place to another - working very hard to stay within perceived time constraints of their individual assignments or shift - generally speaking there is a sense of urgency associated with everyone's work ● Staff are pleasant - there are constant greetings echoed throughout the workspaces, hallways, and common areas ● Various levels of staff (frontline to leaders) gather briefly in passing in common areas (building lobbies, kitchenette areas, administrative offices, etc.) ● Culinary Managers spend a good portion of their shift supporting the team "on the line" at their various meal stations. Interactions are generally brief and mostly positive, especially when students are waiting to be served

	• Facilities Managers kept their jackets on most of the day because they were in and out of the administrative building visiting different worksites all day

Capturing data for this study through the semi-structured interviews, site observations, document review, and my field journal supported the triangulation of the data collected and analyzed (Crewell, 2013) for this qualitative research study. The site observations and document review provided greater depth and richness to the data collection process. Although I did not observe a live training at any of the sites, I was able to make broad connections to the study participants' reflections from the interviews, by seeing the location and layout of the team spaces they described and reviewing the documents for myself. In some instances, the site observations confirmed reflections from study participants. In other instances, I was able to identify reflections that may not have been in agreement with reflections from other participants of the same organization about the same idea, how a study participant may have described their interactions with staff vs. what I saw, and how study participants may have described use of a team space. In reviewing all three forms of data collected, I noted questions or unique ideas and observations that stood out to me and helped me to thoroughly review each form of data to understand the relationship of the data to the research question.

To support the validity of the study, Scribie was utilized in the data collection and analysis process to create the interview transcript. Thorough processing of transcripts allowed for the analysis of the interview data, to confirm the transcript accurately reflected the participant’s account of the interview and to ensure validity (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Verification (trustworthiness) was achieved through triangulation, clarifying researcher bias through journaling, and member checking (Creswell, 2013).

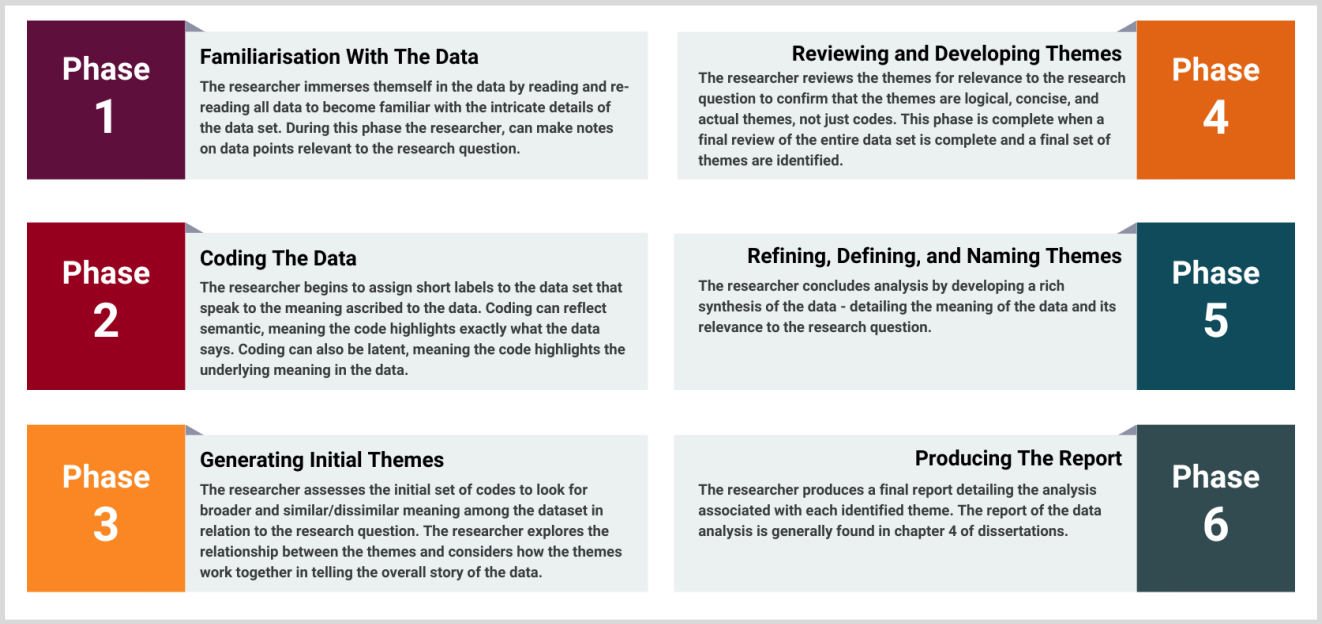
Data Analysis

This study utilized the Thematic Analysis procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2022). Thematic analysis is described by Braun and Clarke (2012) as creating the opportunity for researchers to focus on meaning across a dataset by making sense of the "collective or shared meaning and experiences" of the study participants. In recent years, Braun and Clarke (2022) have expanded their teaching of Thematic Analysis methods to include a more intentional centering of the researcher, in the data analysis process. Reflexive thematic analysis as a process values "a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher…" (p.5). According to Braun and Clarke (2022), "Reflexivity involves the practice of critical reflection on your role as a researcher, and your research practice, and process" (p.5). Unlike traditional qualitative research methods, which encourage the researcher to maintain a fully outside, somewhat detached relationship to the data (allowing the data to speak for itself), Braun and Clarke (2022), highlighted the history and evolution of thematic analysis to be more inclusive of researcher immersion in the data analysis process.

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2022) is comprised of six phases. Each of the six phases, as summarized in Figure 3, emphasizes the necessity of connecting any findings in that phase to the research question. The iterative nature of this data analysis approach allowed me to ensure that there was no deviation from the overall goal of addressing the research question through the data analysis process.

Figure 3

Thematic Analysis Phases Summary (Adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2012; 2022)



Phase one instructs the researcher to review the dataset completely at least twice; making notes during each review. Transcripts for this study were generated through Scribie by uploading the audio recording of the interviews into Scribie. Scribie generated a transcript as a Word document. The transcript was reviewed the first time against the audio file from each interview to ensure it had been transcribed correctly. The second review of the transcript was to remove any information identifying the study participant or their employer. Following the first and second transcript review, I captured reflections and reactions to the interviews in my journal. I captured notes about interview participants' demeanor, apparent and obscure reactions to interview participants' responses to the interview questions, and I made note of ideas interview participants highlighted that I wanted to remember in later phases of the data analysis process. The transcripts were provided to the study participants for member checking, to confirm that the interview was captured accurately.

I reviewed the complete data set (interview transcripts, site observations checklists and, document review checklists) for a third time to identify data extracts that sparked a reaction in relation to the research question. I made notes on the transcripts, checklists, and in my journal to document reactions during the third review of the data set. I captured my reactions to interview participants' responses to the interview questions, site observations, and document reviews. I made note of ideas from a review of the data that I wanted to remember to come back to as I continued the data analysis process. During the fourth review of the data set, I transferred data extracts to Google Sheets to allow for better visibility and organization of the data. A total of 374 data extracts were identified from a review of the interview transcripts, site observations, and document review. In the process of cleaning and coding study data, I revisited my journal notes to remind myself of points that I wanted to explore further or that felt important to highlight through coding. At the conclusion of this phase, I made notes on possible themes from the data as a journal entry.

In phase two of Thematic Analysis, an initial set of codes is developed. At this phase, Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022) advised researchers to code anything that is relevant to the research question. To develop the initial set of codes, I reviewed the 374 data extracts in the Google Sheet to identify three levels of initial reaction codes and make notes about the extract’s context. I was able to sort reaction codes at each level to identify code patterns and to confirm that each of the extracts had been properly codified after multiple reviews of the data. I identified data extracts that stood out as speaking to the phenomenon of study and noted that along with context. At the conclusion of this phase, I made notes on possible themes from the first pass at coding as a journal entry.

Prior to data collection, a set of a priori codes were generated from the empirical literature that was used to inform the development of this study. A Priori coding is the process through which a set of data analysis codes are developed prior to data collection (Bingham, 2023). Also referred to as deductive analysis, the thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2022) supported both inductive and deductive analysis. Braun and Clarke (2012) noted that deductive analysis utilizes "data coding and analysis is a 'top-down' approach, where the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data" (p.3). This study utilized deductive analysis to process data collected through the individual interviews, site observations, and document analysis. The A Priori codes identified in Table 9 were utilized to assess the original set of codes generated in phase two, according to Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2022) description of the phase two process. Upon review of the data in this phase, inductive analysis was used to review the data set and generate the set of codes that contributed to development of the overarching themes. Before moving on to identify themes, I compared the A Priori codes to the data set and determined that all of the A Priori codes were represented in the complete data set.

Table 9

A Priori Codes For Data Analysis

Source	**Code**
Middle Manager understanding of the role they play in translating organization directives into employee job tasks is critical to individual and organizational success (Mair, 2012; Yang, 2010)	Middle Manager Role Expectations
Workplace learning is the forum through which employees, particularly frontline	Training (Workplace Learning)

employees, are able to maintain and enhance work-related skills that support individual and organizational performance and progress their career mobility (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Kyndt et al., 2013)	Learning (Development)
HCT explores the relationship between employer investment in staff training and employee performance. (Barney, 1991; Robinson & Pope, 2023)	Employee Performance
Middle Managers and Frontline Employees often have professional or personal constraints that create challenges to training. (AL-Rawahi, 2022, Kyndt et al., 2013, Mair, 2002; Maxwell, 2016)	Challenge to Training
	Time (Management and Constraints)

In phase three, themes are generated by identifying what "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). To mobilize phase three, I grouped 3 levels of initial reaction codes into one level by consolidating like codes and reviewing the codebook to identify recurring and unique codes. Recurring codes are generated from patterns found in the data set where the same or very closely similar ideas are represented more than twice (Saldana, 2021). In contrast, I identified unique codes as codes that occurred once or twice in the data set. This process resulted in 34 recurring codes and 19 unique codes. The following nine codes were identified as recurring more than five times in the data set: Communication (38), Training (36), Care for Employee (15), Challenges (14), Access (13), Boundaries (9), Disconnect (9), Open Door (7), and Directives (6). I grouped recurring codes and unique codes into a final set of 39 codes.

Four data extracts were coded for lack of relevance to the study and eliminated for further review. 13 data extracts were deleted from the data set after completing a review of two interview participant's transcripts because they contained quantified responses from four interview questions. If the numerical responses for these four interview questions had been captured for all 17 study participants, these responses would have resulted in 68 numbers or percentages being included in the data set with no way to compare responses for understanding. Instead, all 68 numerical responses were captured in four tables (Table 11-Table 15) in chapter 4. At the conclusion of this phase, I made notes on possible themes from the data as a journal entry.

The coding structure developed in phases three to five is detailed in Table 10. Phases four and five require the review and refining of themes from the dataset. In phases four and five, I mapped the code data (Clarke, 2021) manually to assess the relevance of the 39 codes and group them. This process resulted in four data maps with different associations between codes to determine a final grouping in relation to the research question. Six themes were identified and data extracts were then coded according to one of the six themes. Given the volume of data collected from 17 semi-structured interviews, site observations, and a review of organizational documents, data that did not yield a code or the creation of a chart or table, was set aside in the raw data set. At the conclusion of each phase, I revisited the raw data set to ensure nothing was missed or needed to be included as I learned more from the data and the study evolved.

Table 10

Coding Structure

First Cycle Codes	Second Cycle Codes	Code Grouping	Theme
Recurring Codes: ● Access (13) - To training and of training - To leader ● Adult Learning Needs ● Assessment ● Barriers ● Biggest Challenge (14) ● Boundaries (9) ● Busyness or Time ● Care for Employee (15) ● Change Management ● Chain of Command ● Coaching ● Communication (38) ● Directives (6) ● Disconnect (9) ● Emergency Response ● External Training ● Fear	- Care for Employee - Morale - Perception of role - Emergency response role - Busyness or Time - Open Door Policy - Staff Engagement - Trust - Juggling or Rollercoaster - Shifting Priorities - Personal Development - Ongoing Learning - Gender	Middle Manager (9)	Theme 1: Middle Managers understand the critical nature of their role and despite their bandwidth being maxed out, they reported cultivating a team and organizational culture that supports frontline employee development, organizational performance, and the university mission.
	- Barriers to Learning - Job Skills - Job delegation to Contractors - Access to Communication, Leaders or Org. Level - Adult Learning - Frontline Employee	Frontline Employees (6)	Theme 2: Middle managers acknowledge that as a result of earning low wages, frontline employees work through personal circumstances that negatively impact their capacity to engage in workplace learning activities in comparison to other work groups.

• Majority of Time Spent • Middle Manager • Most Time Spent or Doing • Open Door (7) • Perception of Role (27) • Performance • Staff Engagement • Staffing and Vacancy • Time • Train the Trainer • Training (36) • Training Effectiveness (4) • Trust • Tuition Benefit • Why • Working Way Up **Unique Codes:** • COVID-19 • EHS • Family • Formal or Informal • KPIs and Metrics • Level of Experience • Life and Death Nature of Work • Low Wage	Needs		
	- Process Breakdown - Accessibility to Development Opportunities - FLE Personal Expense for Training - Influence of Middle Manager on Employee Development - Tuition Benefit	Theoretical Correlations (4)	Theme 3: Middle managers acknowledge that they do not have the authority or resources to improve access to the learning opportunities frontline employees need for ongoing development.
	- Value in Workplace Learning - Access to learning, Informal or Formal Training - External Training - Tuition Benefit, Compliance - Training - Asynchronous or Synchronous Virtual Training - Mandatory Training	Workplace Learning (8)	Theme 4: Middle managers reported the benefits and barriers of structured and unstructured workplace learning in support of staff development and organizational performance. Middle Managers noted the gap in skills needed for them to design and implement workplace learning for frontline employees.
	- Leadership Directives - Wanting to understand the	Communication (6)	Theme 5: Middle Managers reported that even with best effort, communication between leaders and employees is disrupted and broken, triggering feelings of distrust (of leadership and the

● Meetings ● Morale ● Morning Huddle ● Personal Development ● Personality ● Policy or SOP ● Priorities ● Process ● Safety or Safety Training ● Service Delivery ● Value	"WHY" - Disconnect - "Open Door Policy" - Fear of Leadership - Retaliation - Trust		organization) and a sense of fear among the managerial and frontline teams.
	- Access to Leaders as Middle Managers - Job Performance, Assessment, or Effectiveness - "Chain of Command" - Staff Planning and Support (Vacancies, Learning Planning) - Resources (Staff and Material) - Policies, Processes, and SOP's	Leadership and Organization (6)	Theme 6: Middle Managers identified that university leadership is severely disconnected from the realities of the work experiences and needs of Middle Managers and Frontline Employees, which prevents them from being able to provide sufficient workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees.

Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022) emphasized the value of writing while working through all phases of a thematic analysis to ensure that the final argument answers the research question. Throughout phases one-five of the data analysis process, I journaled, mapped data, and documented each phase of the process to ensure steps were captured and replicated as necessary. Additionally, I made reflection notes and organized a set of possible themes at the conclusion of each phase away from the data to assess how the findings evolved upon each review of the dataset. Phase six yields the final outcomes of the research study in the form of a final report or chapter. Phase six was completed through the reporting of findings in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research must be conducted in a manner that ensures the validity and trustworthiness of the research study. Qualitative researchers must be able to establish the trustworthiness of their research study by demonstrating the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) referred to credibility by relating how closely the research study aligns with the real world. Study findings must be relevant, believable, and researcher bias must be identified. Credibility was established by triangulation, participant data checks, researcher data checks, and committee review. To achieve triangulation, all three sources of data were analyzed to identify commonalities and differences within the data set. Participant data checks or member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of interview transcripts were utilized to provide interview participants with

an opportunity to review their inputs to the interview process, to ask any questions, and to request any modifications to the transcript.

Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis, I reviewed all data collected through interviews, site observations, and the document reviews multiple times in phases one to five of the analysis process. This process of checking and re-checking of the data set at multiple stages of the data analysis process, from different vantage points in the process allowed me to complete researcher data checks. Finally, throughout the data analysis process, I reviewed conclusions made in that phase against notes in my journal, site observation checklists, and document review checklists. Findings were reviewed to determine relationship to study assumptions and relevance to the literature review conducted for this study.

Transferability

The concept of transferability refers to the ability for other researchers to recreate the study in other contexts due to the generalized nature of the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that there is enough descriptive data available to allow for transferability. Use of the Wright et al. (1994) framework of the HR View of Resources Based Theory and other reports from the Association for Talent Development provided additional data that will allow for the transferability of this research study. Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify study participants.

Middle managers and frontline employees are essential elements of any organization regardless of the organization type, location, size or structure (Harding et al., 2014; Kyndt et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968; Silvennoinen &

Nori, 2017) allowing for transferability of this study to other organizations. Both employee populations support the continuity of operations within organizations. As demonstrated by this study, managers of frontline employees are responsible for essential services like maintaining building hvac, ensuring buildings have flowing water, ensuring meals are prepared for students and staff. All of these are services that support an organization's mission.

Further, the literature review conducted for this study demonstrates that middle managers and frontline employees are essential in universities, but also in organizations regardless of type or location. Completion of data collection for this research study at four universities in the Washington DC regional area demonstrates that this study can be replicated at universities and also in any organization because the middle manager and frontline employee dynamic is consistent in service delivery organizations. Data collection and analysis methods were detailed in this chapter and chapter 4 to provide transparency, allowing future researchers to utilize the methods reported.

Dependability

Dependability calls for the research to be able to be repeated if it were conducted within the same contexts and with the same participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure the dependability of this study, interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions - allowing interview participants to elaborate on their responses to questions by adding their own personal experiences to the interview process. Interview transcripts were reconciled with audio recordings. Site observations were directed by the site observation checklist (Appendix H). Similarly, the document review process was directed by the document review checklist (Appendix I). The data collection process was well

documented and reviewed by the dissertation committee before the conclusion of the study. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) was utilized to analyze interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) emphasized the importance of each researcher utilizing the methods that best align to their research study. The processes followed for this study have ensured dependability.

Confirmability

Researcher objectivity is essential for best outcomes in qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The critical nature of data collection requires that the collected data inform study outcomes and not the researcher's preconceived ideas and assumptions. The depth of data collected for this study from semi-structured interviews, site observations, and a review of organizational documents demonstrated that there were consistencies in the experiences of middle managers at four universities in the Washington DC regional area. I employed reflexivity by capturing independent reflections during the data collection and analysis phases in a separate journal from the interview transcripts and checklists to ensure the confirmability of this study. My subjectivity statement was included in this chapter. Additionally, interview audio recordings were audited thoroughly during the data analysis process to prevent misinterpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations for Human Participants

My past work in learning and development provided me with an immersive experience into the day-to-day lived experiences of middle managers developing in their roles and more specifically grappling with the development of their teams. Having perspective on many of the situational nuances that may not be clearly captured in past

studies by scholars who have observed completely from the outside looking in, I utilized my perspective to think through as many possible ethical loopholes and gaps in the study methodology that could have been accounted for while developing the study. Creswell (2013) cautioned researchers about ethical issues arising at all stages of the research process. To that end, potential ethical concerns were considered for each stage of this study.

I adhered to the doctoral student research requirements outlined and monitored by the Institutional Review Board of The George Washington University (IRB# NCR235466). This study was approved as exempt and classified as regulatory category 2 on September 11, 2024. All study participants engaged with the study on a completely voluntary basis. All study participants completed a pre-interview survey to confirm their qualification to participate in the study. Additionally, all participants received a letter of research intent, an informed consent package, and provided verbal consent before commencing the interview.

To ensure the privacy and anonymity of study participants, I arrived early to the interview rooms at each site to prepare the space for the interviews. I covered the windows on the door of the interview rooms so that participants could feel comfortable speaking freely without passerbys peering through the window. I also set the scheduling tool to create a break between each interview. These breaks provided buffer time in the event that an interview ran over and they also prevented me from having to rush the participant to conclude the interview. The breaks gave the study participants time to enter and exit the interview room without having to interact with other study participants.

Finally, the breaks also allowed me time to reflect on the interview, take notes in my journal and on my manual interview notes, and reset my energy before the next interview.

In conjunction with my committee, I developed the interview protocol (Appendix G) to pull out the richness of the study participant's experiences by asking questions that did not compromise their psychological safety. I was very careful during the data collection and data analysis processes not to conflate the experiences of study participants who described working closely together (e.g., study participants may have mentioned someone by positional proximity who was also participating in the study) or those who may have similar experiences of organizational context because they work at the same university or in the same department.

Study participants' identities were kept confidential for the duration of the dissertation process. All recordings (audio and video), organizational documentation, and photographs collected through this study will be stored confidentially and disposed of securely in compliance with the terms set forth with IRB. Following the data collection process, interview transcripts were cleaned of any information that identifies the study participant or their organization. Proprietary information was not removed from the documents provided by study participants or by the researcher for any photos taken at each of the sites. However, as the researcher, I am the only person who has access to these documents and photos. All data collected for this study will be stored on a secure, password protected hard drive for the duration of time identified with IRB.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology of this basic interpretive qualitative research study, described the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning the

study, detailed the data collection and analysis processes that I utilized, and addressed my ethical considerations made to ensure subjectivity. Chapter 4 provides a review of the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Chapter 4 provides a summary of the findings of this basic interpretive qualitative research study. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. To meet the objectives of this study, the following research question was utilized: "How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?"

Over a period of 45 days, 17 1-hour, semi-structured interviews were conducted with middle managers at four universities in the Washington DC regional area. To support triangulation for this study, I conducted site observations of team training and employee workspaces that were led by three study participants at three of four universities. These site observations included an assessment of employee workspaces, team huddle, training rooms, computer labs, kitchen front of house serving and back of house prep areas, and conference rooms. The fourth university provided a photo of their training and team room to be utilized for the assessment of team workspaces.

Additionally, I reviewed 18 institutional documents that were provided by interview participants and a department administrator at three of the four universities. As part of my site authorization request (Appendix B), I requested institutional documents to better understand the flow of communication related to workplace learning at an organizational level and between middle managers and their frontline employees. I requested a copy of written communications (e.g., email, text message, memos, other forms of communication) between study participants and their employees regarding

recent or upcoming workplace learning activities. I reviewed 18 documents from three of the four universities.

This chapter provides an overview of the research study outcomes and the themes identified through an analysis of the data generated by the three data sources for this qualitative study.

Research Setting

A study conducted by SG Analytics (2024), named the education industry as one of the fastest growing industries in the United States and the pursuit of higher education as a non-negotiable for professionals wanting to obtain employment in similarly growing industries. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States of America generated a revenue of $996B in AY20-21, placing the higher education industry just below the top 10 industries in the US. In 2025, institutions of higher education in the United States dominated global rankings, with 23 of the top 50 universities based in the United States (Buchholz, 2025). The high industry ranking of higher education, which is comparable to other corporate industry titans, validates the utilization of colleges and universities as the basis for this research study.

In the District of Columbia alone, higher education institutions play a critical role in the economy and communities in which they exist. The District of Columbia Department of Employment Services (2023) reported eight universities (and university affiliated entities) in the top 20 private employers in Washington DC. The same is true for the Washington DC regional area, including the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. Universities and university entities are represented in the top employers for both

states and the District, making them significant contributors to the labor market in this regional area; responsible for creating employment opportunities for the region and as a result being in a unique position to aid in the professional and personal development of employees of these institutions. After distributing the call for study participants through multiple networks, the participants in this study represented four, 4-year universities based in Washington DC.

Participant Demographics

The outcomes of this study were not dependent on individual demographics. However, through the pre-interview questionnaire, the following information was gathered. Study participants were employed as a middle manager, currently overseeing the work of frontline employees, responsible for implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees, and working within a higher education institution (2-year college or 4-year university) located in the Washington DC regional area. A total of 17 study participants consisted of 5 women and 12 men. All study participants hold a college degree or technical license. Participants noted managing frontline teams ranging in size from 5 to 400+ employees. All of the study participants were employed by a 4-year university in the Washington DC regional area. Finally, 15 of the 17 of the study participants reported not directly managing a budget for workplace learning activities.

Summary of Data Collection

This section provides a brief summary of the data collection process associated with this qualitative research study. Data for this study was gathered from 17 semi-structured interviews, three site observations, and an analysis of 18 documents from

three universities in Washington DC. Data was collected over a period of 45 days, from September 15, 2024 to October 30, 2024.

Interviews

17 1-hour, semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. The goal of the semi-structured interview process was to collect data about the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees to inform the research study. Each interview was conducted according to the interview protocol (Appendix G). Five of the interviews were conducted virtually and 12 of the interviews were conducted on-site and in person. All of the interviews were audio recorded through the Zoom software. The audio files were uploaded to Scribie to be transcribed. At the conclusion of each interview, I captured my reflections and feelings in a journal to ensure subjectivity. I reviewed interview transcripts to remove any information that would identify the participant or their institution of employment. A copy of the interview transcript was provided to study participants to review and confirm accuracy. Verification (trustworthiness) was achieved through triangulation, clarifying researcher bias through journaling, and member checking (Creswell, 2013).

Site Observations

Over a period of three weeks, I completed site observations of employee workspaces, team huddle, training rooms, computer labs, kitchen front of house serving and back of house prep areas, and conference rooms at three of four university sites associated with interview participants. I took photos of team huddle areas, training rooms, and other spaces relevant to this study. I was asked not to photograph staff that

were working in the computer lab and kitchen spaces. The interview participant at site three provided a photo of their training room in lieu of the site observation.

While on-site, I was able to observe the study participants and their staff interactions in real time. The site observations gave me an opportunity to compare the execution of work practices of middle managers with what they reported in their interviews, by asking follow up questions about their practices related to workplace learning. Being able to engage with middle managers on-site added a fluidity to data collection of middle manager practices that interviews alone would not have provided. Notes collected during the site observations were coded and contributed to the identification of the themes presented later in this chapter.

Document Review

To support triangulation for this study (Creswell, 2013), better understand the organizational landscape and the context that middle managers are working in (Harding et al., 2014, Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Yang, 2010), and to further assess middle managers' understanding of their role implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, documents were provided by study participants at three of the four study sites represented in this study. A study participant at the fourth site provided an organizational chart, but declined to provide additional documentation due to their time constraints and a need to return to their work following the interview and site observation.

Utilizing written communication as a form of document review (Creswell, 2013) allowed me to further understand how middle managers are translating organizational directives into workplace learning goals and activities (Johansen & Hawes, 2016). A total

of 18 documents that included organizational charts, training materials (onboarding training plans and training presentations), standard operating procedure (SOP) documents, workplace learning email templates, and newsletters that included communication related to workplace learning activities were included in the document review for this study. During the review of documents provided, I captured reactions on the document review checklist and also in my journal. All of the documents were reviewed in the data analysis process and findings are detailed in the following sections. Completing the semi-structured interviews, site observations, and document review provided more detailed data to support triangulation for this study.

Summary of Data Analysis

This study utilized the thematic analysis procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2022) and summarized in Figure 3. Each of the six phases of thematic analysis emphasizes the necessity of connecting any findings in that phase to the research question. In phase one, I reviewed the transcripts, site observation checklists and document review checklists twice to check the transcripts against the audio file for each interview and remove any identifying information about the participant or the university they represented. I also shared transcripts with interview participants for member checking. On the third review of the transcripts and the checklists I identified data extracts from the interviews, document review, and site observations. In phase two, I reviewed the data and identified 374 data extracts from which an initial set of codes was generated. The A Priori codes that were developed prior to data collection were checked against the initial set of codes and I determined that all of the A Priori codes were represented in the complete data set.

In phase three, I consolidated like codes to identify recurring and unique codes. This process resulted in 34 recurring codes and 19 unique codes. 13 data extracts from the data set were not considered in the development of themes because they contained quantified answers that were converted into a tabular format and included later in this chapter. The following nine codes were identified as recurring more than five times in the data set: Communication (38), Training (36), Care for Employee (15), Challenges (14), Access (13), Boundaries (9), Disconnect (9), Open Door (7), and Directives (6). I grouped recurring codes and unique codes into a final set of 39 codes. At the conclusion of phases one through three, I made notes capturing my reactions to the data set and notes on possible themes in my journal and also in the Google sheet.

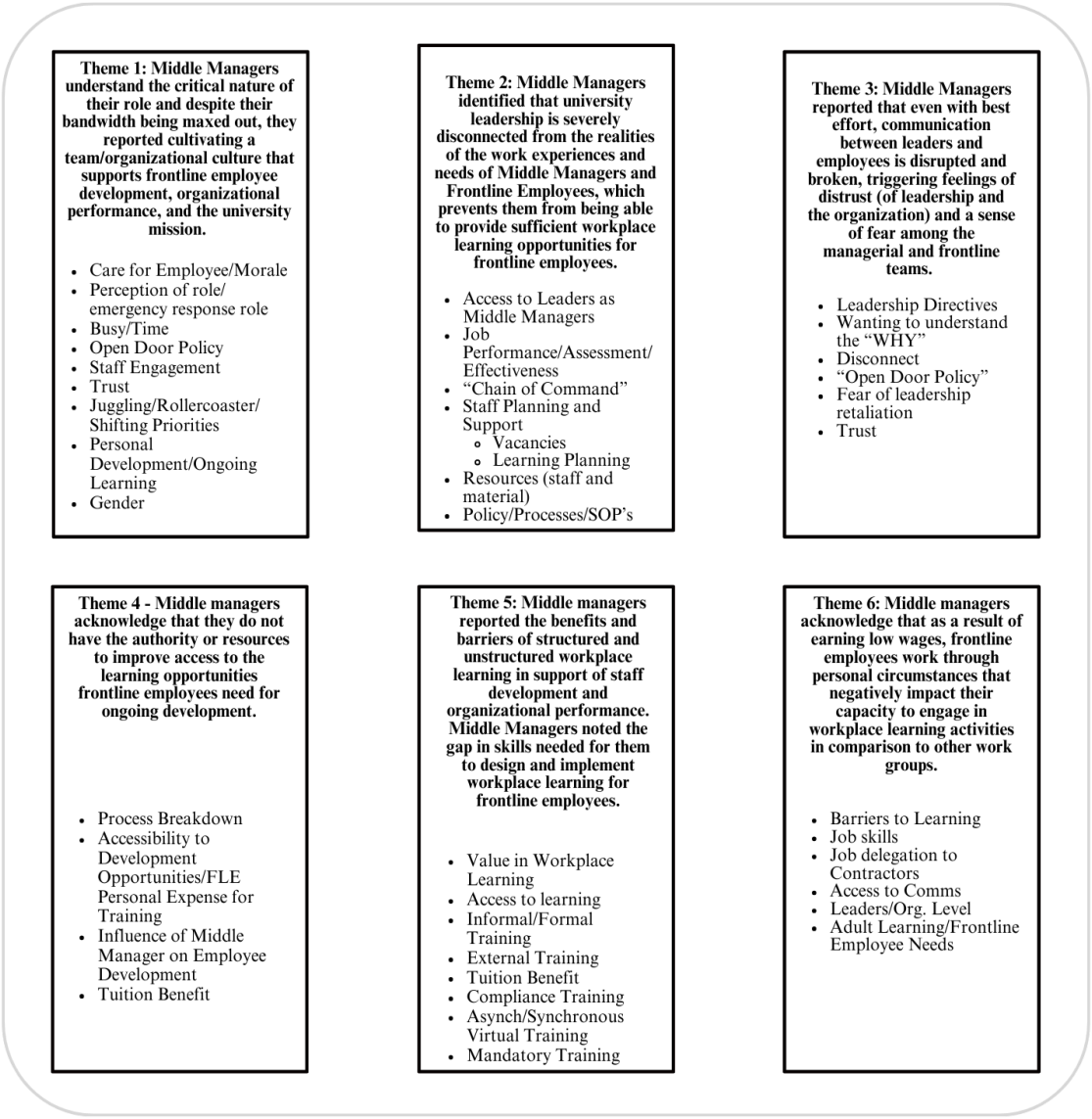
Phases four and five require the review and refining of themes from the dataset. In phases four and five, I mapped the code data manually to assess the relevance of the 39 codes and group them. This process resulted in four handwritten data maps with different associations between codes to determine a final grouping in relation to the research question (see Appendix J). Six themes were identified and data extracts were then coded according to one of the six themes. Figure 4 is a visual representation of each of the 39 codes and their associated theme.

Throughout phases one through five of the data analysis process, I journaled, mapped data, and documented the steps for each phase of the process to ensure steps were captured and replicated as necessary. Additionally, I made reflection notes and organized a set of possible themes at the conclusion of each phase away from the data to assess how the findings evolved upon each review of the dataset. Phase six yields the

final outcomes of the research study in the form of a final report or chapter. Phase six is completed through the reporting of findings in this chapter.

Figure 4

Summary of Themes and Associated Codes



Research Study Themes

Thematic analysis is an iterative process that allows the researcher to manipulate the data set like puzzle pieces to identify common and contrasting ideas that tie back to

the research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that, "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p.10). As I completed phases 1 through 5 to thoroughly review and analyze the data corpus and the data set, I concluded this process by grouping 39 codes into 6 themes that detail how middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

Theme Data Selection

In my third level of coding, with data extracts grouped by recurring codes, I organized the data extracts into larger groupings to surface the underlying meaning or relationship between the extracts and identify themes. After multiple rounds reviewing all the data extracts, codes, and their associated theme, some extracts were regrouped to another theme or noted as overlapping and applying with another theme. When this process was complete, I went back through to ensure that each code was paired to a data extract associated with each theme. A comprehensive arrangement of data extracts (from the semi-structured interviews, site observations, and review of institutional documents) and corresponding themes reported on in this chapter can be found in Appendix J. The data extracts that provided the most context to the theme and code were selected to be included in this report and they are noted in Appendix K. A complete summary detailing the relationship between the codes, data extracts, and themes can be found in Appendix J.

Theme Reporting Structure

The remainder of Chapter 4 is organized to provide a reporting of this study's six themes and the associated data that supported the development of the themes. The

sections of this chapter that follow, were organized to align with the top-down flow of the conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 2), with theme relevance cascading from middle managers, to frontline employees, and to workplace learning within the context of organizational influence. Themes three and five appear to be lengthier in content because they contain the quantified responses to questions asked in the interview protocol (Appendix G). As noted in Chapter 3, these numeric responses were excluded from coding and organized into tables to allow for the comparison of like data. Each theme section includes a statement of the theme, a narrative detailing the data, and the data extracts supporting the theme.

The data collected for this qualitative study is representative of the experiences of 17 middle managers, working in operations roles at 4 universities in the Washington DC regional area. The data gathered for this study highlights the positive and challenging experiences of these middle managers, who are all working in similar organizational structures as demonstrated by the organizational charts and other documents provided for the document review, the interviews, and the site observations. The data collected for this study were reviewed and rehashed consistently in the development of the themes and conclusions for this study to identify nuances and disconfirming data that speaks to the diversity of experiences among these middle managers. However, it can be concluded through the data collected, that the middle managers featured in this study are working in very similar circumstances to achieve organizational goals and to provide workplace learning opportunities for their frontline employees. The data featured in this chapter presents as patterned data, largely representing commonalities in the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. A short

section of disconfirming data that highlights middle managers experiences with gender and the impact of the study location is included before the conclusion of this chapter.

The following theme sections highlight the role middle managers play in developing team members and team culture, challenges related to broken organizational and communications processes, the most common methods of workplace learning employed within the universities featured in this study, and the challenges frontline employees face engaging with workplace learning and accessing external professional development training.

Theme 1

Middle managers understand the critical nature of their role and despite their bandwidth being maxed out, they reported cultivating a team/organizational culture that supports frontline employee development, organizational performance, and the university mission.

When researched and reviewed, the middle manager role is often described as the functions performed by the role (Harding, 2014), not necessarily by the strategies employed by individuals in the role and the impact they have on an organization. Huy (2001) noted that it is far more common for the perception of middle managers in theory and in practice to elicit feelings of averageness, ordinariness, or worthlessness. However, this study affirmed that on the contrary, middle managers are the lifeline of organizations - the regulators, the peace makers, and the team builders.

When asked about their perception of their role and how they see themselves fitting in with the university mission, all of the study participants described a deep commitment to the effort they invest on a daily basis to connect to their employees and to successfully execute the duties they are responsible for as middle managers. Eric shared this perspective,

> Honestly, I think that facilities is the foundation of any mission of an academic institution. The reality is that if we have departments who they'll say their mission is to, further academic research excellence, you can't do that if you don't have lights and HVAC and clean spaces that are free of trash and debris. You can't do that if you don't have facilities."

All of the study participants provided multiple examples of situations where they see their role and the role of their teams solving a problem, addressing an issue, or trying something new that saves the day for a member of the university community. Thomas noted:

> So the way I kind of like to think about it is when we look at like the big picture, the goal of everybody at this university is to support student life and academic excellence. And when you're in university operations, you feel sometimes very distanced from that. But normally what I try to do to kind of like ground us is think about how the backbone of our institution is our staff. Our students wouldn't be able to be successful or have what they need or progress, whether it's graduate, undergraduate research, non-research areas.

Like the other study participants Thomas' reflection demonstrates middle managers' ability to see the work of their frontline teams in the context of the bigger picture of university operations and also as working to directly support the institutional mission. His perspective also demonstrates the high value study participants and their teams place on the work they do everyday.

All of the study participants demonstrated an extreme sense of pride in their work and in the work that they do for and with their team. They see themselves as embodying the mission of the university, when they reflect on the criticality of the work they perform and the necessity for workplace learning to succeed in their roles, Rachel said:

> They just would not be able to succeed without our staff. And our staff are

> very much in need of professional development and opportunities to grow, to sustain themselves, to be retained at the institution. And so I think in order for us to achieve that goal of academic excellence, positive student life, better research, better medical, you know, every single thing that is kind of built into our different silos, I think the only way we can do that is when we support our staff in growing and sustaining their roles. And from a training and development standpoint, we hear so many issues with staff relationships, managers, how people engage with each other, and lack of opportunities to advance in their roles. And we've seen kind of through the pandemic how that had led to a historic loss in employees retention or attrition-wise in university history. So, I think of our role as responsive to the mission, but not as directly correlated as some people kind of might see it in other parts of the university.

Rachel, like other study participants described her work as part of a bigger picture, the university mission. It is not enough for middle managers to just execute tasks and delegate assignments, it is essential that middle managers understand how a mistake or misstep can have much broader university impacts outside of their day-to-day work. To ensure employees have this same sense of pride and responsibility, study participants take intentional steps to create a team culture that supports collaboration and efficient operations.

Study participants referenced the intentional actions they take to create a home away from home for the students of the university and their awareness that the university's operational areas under their care should create a space for the university

community to thrive. In the same way that study participants described their desire to create a home away from home for the students of the university, study participants also reflected on how important it is to care for and cultivate a safe space for their frontline employees. Ethan said:

> And we do from time to time, I take everybody to lunch together, get up off work and the thing is when we talk at lunch, we talk about families, vacations and good times. Things like that. One day when someone is trying to talk about work, I stop them. I said, this is our time together, not about work. Let's forget work, let's talk about us. So kind of like I know every one of them, their family, what they have that they know about my family, my kids, all that stuff.

In addition to taking intentional actions to create space for engagement outside of the workplace, study participants described optimizing time during the business day, when team members are gathered together daily (e.g., morning huddles and lunch breaks) to introduce conversations that are not directly related to work, so that the team can develop strong working dynamics and show up as their authentic selves. Study participants reflected on the trust that is developed when they, as leaders, are visible on the job sites and intentional about being accessible to the frontline employees throughout the day. Alena added, “Everybody matters. But the folks that aren't gonna trust you just aren't gonna trust you. They're not gonna trust leadership. They're always gonna think you’re hiding something up your sleeve and for those folks, I don't cater as much to.” Alena’s perspective highlights her understanding of the value of trust among her team, but also points to the reality that every team member will not trust management. Even in

situations where trust is not present, Alena noted how important it is to include everyone as part of the team.

Study participants noted that trust must be earned between them and the frontline employees, but that once it has been established, employees look to study participants for guidance on a variety of issues ranging from personal matters to work related matters. Isaiah noted that,

> Everybody wants to come and talk to the boss anyway. But when they look at you as somebody they can really trust, look at you as a friend, look at you as somebody who always knows what to say, knows what to do, has their best interest in mind. Sometimes they tend to overshare.

Isaiah highlighted the benefit of trust among his frontline team. He also highlighted the importance of having boundaries as a middle manager to ensure team engagement does not cross professional boundaries. The trust created as a result of the intentional actions of middle managers to build team culture, is also critical when it comes to supporting frontline employees as they develop awareness of their delivery of services to the campuses they serve.

Study participants also noted that trust and cohesion among the team is critical given the nature of the work in university operations. Study participants described their understanding of the potentially detrimental impacts of poor service delivery in campus operations, if a critical detail is missed or if their team has a misstep. Mallory reflected on this reality by adding, “and you have to be able to bring those people together and create some level of a cohesive team, because honestly, life may depend on it”. The impacts can be severe to the point of life or death, like a student being electrocuted because an

electrical outlet was left exposed accidentally by a team member. Due to the crucial nature of their work, study participants described always being in observation and training mode, ensuring that their teams are equipped to perform work tasks safely, manage the workload efficiently, and to be prepared to pivot as the needs of the organization change. Study participants acknowledged maintaining this level of mindfulness in the midst of managing constantly evolving priorities.

Study participants reflected on their day-to-day work experience as a roller coaster or a juggling act, noting how quickly their (and their team's) work priorities can shift from focusing on daily work tasks to reprioritizing work tasks due to an operations emergency or a request from leadership. Hardy noted that:

> Everybody has so much going on. Even just here on shifts. That is the biggest challenge. Figuring out what the priorities are across the campus and how we can do it. Everyone thinks their need is the priority. The medical school has a need, dining has a need, but then I got athletics over here and they have a need. But then, here comes the residential buildings and they have a need. I think the problem is probably prioritization, right? It's figuring out what is the most important thing to do.

Study participants described the variety and frequency of activities they are engaged in on a daily basis to keep university operations moving forward. The on-site observations for this study affirmed that team members are always on the move - dashing from one place to another working very hard to stay within perceived time constraints of their individual assignments. There was a general sense of urgency associated with everyone's

work. Despite this need to hurry along, staff were pleasant and echoes of constant greetings and conversations could be heard when passing through the team workspaces.

Theme 1 calls attention to the methods study participants employ to manage their evolving personal workload in addition to managing the work of their frontline employee teams in a rapidly changing work environment. Theme 1 provides clarity into how middle managers view the many responsibilities they balance on a day-to-day basis, including planning for workplace learning. This theme peels back the curtain into the middle manager's personal philosophy about the way they view their responsibilities and the value they place in their work and in their employees. Study participants described their intentional actions to cultivate a sense of belonging among their team and to invest the 1-1 time to ensure each team member's individual development is not stagnant. Study participants spoke to understanding the value of each individual team member, which is a perspective that comes from study participant's day-to-day immersion in managing work expectations for frontline employees. Study participants described a deep sense of mission alignment associated with the fact that university operations provide essential services to the campus community.

Theme 1 provides greater transparency into the efforts middle managers make to form a genuine connection with their team and develop a mission-aligned team culture in the midst of uncertainties that result from the constantly evolving priorities in university operations. Study participants demonstrated a heightened awareness of the needs of the organization and the reality that their role is expected to respond to those needs. Study participants attributed the high-volume demands as one of the challenges in finding time to implement workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Theme 1 details how

middle managers steady the course as the lookout across the organization, dispatching team members to respond to the organizational needs. In contrast to the very hands-on role that middle managers play on a regular basis, study participants called attention to a disconnect at the senior leadership level which hinders the implementation of workplace learning activities for frontline employees.

Theme 2

Middle managers identified that university leadership is severely disconnected from the realities of the work experiences and needs of middle managers and frontline employees, which prevents them from being able to provide sufficient workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees.

Middle managers expertly manage operations at their level and within their control that senior leaders do not have any visibility into. As detailed in the literature review for this qualitative study, researchers (Engle et al., 2017; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Harding et al., 2014; Mair, 2002) note that middle managers have a responsibility to carry out directives provided by organizational leaders and also to be able to manage the use and deployment of resources to frontline employees. Study participants described a disconnect when senior leaders do not have the information they need to make meaningful decisions and creating a space for middle managers to be able to share feedback that will help inform those decisions.

Most notable during the site visits at the three universities was that no senior leaders were present in the workspaces or team spaces occupied by frontline employees. While the site observations were only representative of a snapshot in time, this observation is indicative of the fact that senior leaders spend their time tending to higher level organizational priorities and that they are not dialed into the day-to-day occurrences at the frontline level, those issues are left to the middle managers to tend to. Several study

participants described being expected to manage the outcome of senior leader's decisions with no opportunity to provide input into the decision. Malachi noted, "I'm seeing issues that upper management might not see or even know about when I speak to the morale of the workers and it seems like it's a disconnect between what they see and what's really happening." Considering their positioning within the organization, study participants commented on being expected as middle managers, to "make it work", often being expected to align people and available resources to the directional changes prescribed by organizational leadership.

Study participants reported feeling like their feedback was falling on deaf ears and not taken into consideration, when they are in a position to inform senior leadership about what is happening at the front line level. Study participants also reported feelings of fear when articulating their concerns or fear of retaliation for speaking up about a problem within the organization. Sarah commented "But I wouldn't take it upon myself to do that because I know what their processes are, so I don't overstep my bounds…Because I don't wanna be getting in trouble." Study participants also noted that because frontline employees are working with the tools, products, and other resources that they are given to complete their jobs, that they have the experience and knowledge about the issues with these resources that senior leaders do not have. Study participants advocated for senior leaders to create space for frontline employees to be able to provide feedback on the use of those resources and to also be allowed to share opinions on any changes related to those resources, before the changes occur.

As it pertains to resource allocation and management, middle managers reported not having a clear understanding of what resources were available to them and not being

able to control the budget to make impactful decisions on the areas that matter most to them in their day-to-day work. Middle managers also noted that COVID-19 had a significant impact on resource availability in recent years and that their department's resources still have not been restored from shifts that occurred between 2020-2022. Study participants reported having to do significantly more work with less people or physical resources. Study participants noted the limitations that are created by working in these resource restricted environments and the adverse impact of not being able to scale workplace learning activities to align with the needs of the employees. Rachel reflected:

> I'll probably start with resources are also unclear and not well communicated. So, often we're just sort of operating almost with nothing. Like, just whatever we can do with our bodies and our computers. And so it's hard for me to answer that because there's so little access to information on resources and budget. It's pretty much sort of a mystery. And I think a lot of that shifted after COVID. And because of that, I am mostly operating with what I'm capable to do, capable of doing without having to request resources, which again, creates a lot of limitations on what we can do.

Although organizations are consistently grappling with effectively managing resources in support of employee development (Wright et al., 1994), the middle managers that participated in this study emphasized that lingering resource shortages and unclear communication about the availability of resources exacerbates the adverse impact on their ability to carry out their duties, including implementing workplace learning activities for their frontline employees. Similar to resource shortages, study participants

also described a lack of adequate technology as an ongoing barrier to providing workplace learning activities for their employees.

Study participants noted that not having adequate technology to be able to provide workplace learning for employees or to communicate with employees is a resource limitation. When asked about the biggest barrier to workplace learning, Rachel said,

> Honestly, I would say lack of sufficient resources to accomplish our goals. Lack of technology, lack of tangible physical resources, unclear budget access. And I think those are really concrete barriers to efficiency. And because of that, we're spending a lot of time on things that don't allow us to actually meet some really great, large training goals.

Limited access to technology, outdated technology, and limited resources to provide workplace learning activities to improve the use of technology for frontline employees across the university puts a significant strain on the middle managers to bridge these gaps by duplicating efforts to adequately cover a job requirement. Inadequate access to technology also has impacts for productivity which ultimately carries over into the university's performance goals.

Finally, study participants shared their experiences receiving directives from their senior leaders, interpreting those directives, and applying them to the day-to-day work for their frontline employees. Study participants reported feeling resistance from the staff when implementing these new changes and directives. Study participants also reported resistance from senior leadership when it came to requesting and obtaining the resources necessary to carry out the directives that they've been given. Chris reflected on the seemingly impossible challenge of requesting needed resources by saying, "I'm not

getting resources from upper management to be able to give to my people what they need." When requests for resources from middle managers go unaddressed by senior leaders, it leaves middle managers feeling helpless and instigates unnecessary tension between middle managers and senior leaders. Frontline employees are also negatively impacted by a lack of action by senior leaders to address resource challenges. Senior leaders must be aware of the resource needs of middle managers and their employees. If resource needs cannot be met, for whatever reason, senior leaders should communicate that and support middle managers in the process of identifying an alternative to their resource challenge.

Study participants shared examples related to the disconnect between what is actually happening at the frontline level in contrast to what senior leaders believe is happening at the frontline level from their perspective. Chris reflected on a directive given to have frontline employees improve certain kitchen standards. In order to be able to comply with the directive given, he knew that additional staff hours would be required to support this change in operations. However, he was not granted the additional financial resources needed to allow the employees to utilize the extra hours to improve the operation as directed. Chris was expected to comply with this directive, in a resource restricted environment, despite making senior leadership aware that their directive would put further strain on the work environment and the employees.

Theme 2 amplifies several different factors that demonstrate how middle managers understand their role within the organization and how these different factors impact their implementation of workplace learning for frontline employees. Study participants described reconciling not having their expertise factored into leadership

decisions, managing work expectations despite resource (physical, human, and technological capital) shortages, managing resistance to change from senior leaders and frontline employees, and how disconnected senior leadership is from what is happening at the frontline level. Study participants are acutely aware that a misstep in implementing organizational directives can have detrimental effects for the members of the university community, including frontline employees. Despite these challenges, study participants also described their resilience and determination to support their teams while continuing to drive the organization's performance goals forward. Theme 2 highlights a lack of or inadequate communication between senior leaders and middle managers related to addressing resource challenges. As organizational directives change and are passed down to middle managers to disseminate to frontline teams, it is critical that communication between all levels of the organization are intact.

Theme 3

Middle managers reported that even with best effort, communication between leaders and employees is disrupted and broken, triggering feelings of distrust (of leadership and the organization) and a sense of fear among the managerial and frontline teams.

Middle managers serve a critical role in the process of workflow within the organization. Middle managers have the responsibility to receive instruction from senior leadership, interpret the information, and cascade that information to frontline teams (Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002). Effective communication is critical in the workplace but especially between the middle manager and frontline employee levels. As this study has found and is highlighted in Theme 5, the majority of workplace learning at the four universities represented in this study is occurring through unstructured workplace learning (Jacobs & Park, 2009). Given that these informal

moments of on-the-job training or coaching at the worksite dominate frontline employee development, it is essential that organizational processes supported by effective communication are established and clear for all employees within the organization.

One of the many benefits of conducting site observations was being able to immerse myself in the day-to-day work culture of the three universities that allowed site observations. During these observations, I noted that all of the universities had signage on walls to provide pertinent safety reminders or short instructions for how to complete a task. One university also had screens in common areas that displayed a recurring cadence of the latest departmental news and featured birthdays of team members. Utilization of signage and displays in team workspaces is a demonstration of the effort and understanding of middle managers to provide access to information for their frontline teams in many different formats - knowing that they are needing to communicate across technical specialties, shifts, and in many cases various languages in the workplace. Incorporating employee messaging about birthdays, training, and other events happening within the organization is an intentional step taken to build team culture and community for team members who are dispersed across campus and who work on different shifts.

Even with the best effort by various entities within the university to support communication throughout the organization, the feedback loop between frontline employees and senior leaders is fragmented which creates feelings of distrust among the frontline employees for the leadership and the organization. As a result, this distrust has a negative impact on the communication between middle managers and frontline teams. Mitch likened communication within his organization to a game of telephone as information is disseminated from senior leaders to the frontline employees. He noted that

“one challenge is also that it just like sometimes doesn't get to me. Like sometimes, there are priorities at that level that I never hear about, that I don't know, and they don't know what we're doing”. The reflection that Mitch shared clearly demonstrates that he believes that senior leaders are not aware that information is not traveling to the necessary parts of the organization to ensure middle managers have the information to effectively communicate to and train their employees.

Similarly, Ethan reflected on communication from leadership regarding changes to processes or critical budget related information not being delivered at all or being delivered incorrectly by leadership to the frontline team. Ethan shared this example of the communication disconnect between leadership and the frontline level:

> So for example, I was in a meeting with the group, and a university leader comes in, telling everybody that this year everyone is gonna receive a 5% performance increase, setting the expectation that everyone gets the same thing. But I am the one to decide who actually gets what or doesn't because their performance was poor. Now I have to sit down with these people. Trying to explain to them that they’re not getting those merit increases. And that was the most difficult thing. They heard it from here [pointing up to indicate leadership]. And I'm telling you now I'm in the middle between I'm rejecting it or I'm the one who's doing that to them. So I have to explain to them, I have to show them data. I have to prove it to them. All because he came in and made this big speech without knowing what’s really happening.

Ethan shared his disappointment in the university and its leaders for not ensuring that communication was disseminated effectively throughout the organization. Ethan’s

example is a clear demonstration of the negative implications of leadership being disconnected from day-to-day operations and the frontline employees who drive these operations forward. Although leadership may have had good intentions for their visit, sharing misinformation created a ripple of negative outcomes that the middle manager was left to resolve with the team. Further, the sensitivity of the matter and the personal impact to frontline employees caused the frontline employees to have feelings of distrust for their manager and the senior leader at this university.

Study participants noted that it is often necessary to pivot daily operations at a moment's notice as a result of an emergency or new directives given by leadership. In these moments it is absolutely necessary that communication is thorough and reaches all of the managers impacted to be able to ensure that the proper adjustments can be made throughout the organization. Study participants reflected on the efforts they make to communicate with their frontline employees. Given the volume and variety of activities that must occur on any given day, middle managers are constantly receiving and sending messages (in writing and verbally) to ensure work assignments are distributed in a timely manner and that team members are supported in executing the work assignments. Study participants were asked to share their regular methods for communication with their team. Table 11 provides a summary of the methods study participants reported utilizing to communicate with frontline employees on a regular basis.

Table 11

Methods of Communication Utilized By Middle Managers

Manager to Employee Communication Methods	Identified Preferences by Manager
Text	16
Phone Call	11
Face to Face	15
Facetime, Virtual Meeting	5
In Person - On the Job Site	4
Email	6
A Combination of All of the Above Communication Methods	15

Of the study participants that reported, 16 out of 17 utilized text messages as a primary means of communication. Study participants shared that short messages could be shared with multiple employees in the field at one time, while middle managers are attending meetings or addressing other needs that have emerged throughout the day. Eric reflected on the necessity to follow up after using multiple methods of communication to frontline employees:

> If I do send a message via email or text, sometimes it is not received as I intended. Whether that's me neglecting to provide a detail to a situation or something or somebody not interpreting what I'm telling them in the correct way as well. I have to follow up.

Study participants also reflected on the importance of being able to communicate regularly with frontline employees face to face on the job site, in daily huddles, or in other regular team meetings. Fifteen out of seventeen study participants identified using a combination of methods including email, text message, phone calls, and face-to-face

communication to communicate priorities, changes in work requirements, and general working expectations on a regular basis. Isaiah on why face-to-face communication is more effective:

> But you have to think about who your audience is, right. And what their specialty is and what their skill level is, so that we don't miscommunicate something or speak in terms that people don't understand...That is huge. And that definitely comes down with the frontline staff, in other realms of the university, right. I'm not a plumber. But I'm trying to get something by, and they may use technical terms that I don't know, or they're using technical terms when they talk to me and that's where I think that face to face comes from 'cause I can give him a weird look if I don't understand.

Study participants stated that they are thoughtful about reviewing messages that they send to frontline employees about their daily work tasks to ensure they did not miss critical details. Study participants also mentioned their process of following up with frontline employees to ensure communication, especially written communication by text or email, has been understood and interpreted in the way that it was intended.

Study participants reflected on taking each employee's individual needs (e.g., language accommodations, skill level, etc.) into consideration when thinking through communicating messages with frontline employees. In the context of this research study, study participants described having oversight over areas that may be outside of their technical background. For example, an employee who has trained to be a licensed plumber and has been promoted to oversee a variety of technical trades may not be as

well-versed in managing heating systems. This gap in technical skill limits study participant's ability to communicate fluidly with their employees.

Study participants noted that in many instances across their university, the necessity to be able to communicate in technical terms of a specific trade can create communication problems on multiple levels. When a middle manager does not have the technical expertise needed to be able to guide an employee on site, this breakdown in communication potentially puts the employees and the university at risk if a mistake is made. Study participants described a frequent practice of pulling in experts from other teams or external contractors to support gaps in skill proficiency and the execution of job duties when technical language creates a barrier for frontline employees and their middle manager. Study participants also mentioned the use of technical language as a challenge when preparing workplace learning materials for multiple trades or skills at any given time. Being able to provide trade specific workplace learning activities is an essential skill middle managers must have within university operations.

Middle managers reported spending the majority of their daily time tending to operational administrative needs and attending meetings. As observed while on site and captured in study participants' interview responses, operations organizations rely on meetings to be able to set operational strategy, disseminate operational strategy, and occasionally provide a space for middle managers to weigh in on how the implementation of operational strategy is going. Throughout the interview process and site observations I was able to compile a summary of meetings that occur within university operations organizations. Table 12 provides a description of the purpose of the meeting, the intended audience, and the frequency at which each meeting occurs.

Table 12

Operational Meetings Reported by Study Participants and Observed During On-Site Observations

Intended Audience	Meeting Purpose	Frequency
Weekly Staff Meetings (Leader and Direct Report team	Review priorities for the week and collaboratively solve challenges	Weekly
Monthly Managers Meeting (all managers from seniors to leads - including 5-7 levels of leaders)	Interface with executive leaders to discuss division-wide projects, priorities, and policy changes. Space for short training on organizational priorities and procedures.	Monthly
Biweekly Leadership Meeting (4 levels)	Strategic Planning meeting to discuss matters outside of day-to-day operations	Biweekly
Daily huddles (up to 2 levels of leadership with frontline teams)	Frontline employees and direct managers (occasional drop in by higher leadership - from middle managers to executive leaders)	Daily
Weekly Regional Operations and Training Meeting (3 levels of leaders)	Review operational issues across the region, review training tip of the week	Weekly
Weekly Operations Meeting (3 levels of leadership)	Review of weekly operations, with an emphasis on after-hour and weekend operational needs	Weekly
Weekly Building Coordination Meeting (4 levels of leadership)	Review of Outstanding building projects, cross-team discussions related to operational issues within buildings	Weekly
1-1 Meetings (2 levels)	Opportunity for managers to connect with one direct report to discuss business and personal matters related to that individual's priorities and performance.	As Needed - Some described this as a weekly, monthly, or ad hoc meeting

According to study participants, each meeting serves a different purpose and includes a different grouping of leaders within the organization. Study participants reported spending a majority of their day in meetings. Study participants noted that

meetings can be helpful for coordinating complex matters across campus facilities and cross-functional teams. Study participants also noted the challenges presented to communication with frontline employees by being held up in meetings for the majority of the day. Study participants commented that meetings reduce the amount of time they can be present with frontline employees. They also commented that meetings can negatively impact their ability to communicate essential information to frontline employees in a timely manner.

Upon review of my site observation notes and interview transcripts, I identified that middle managers were included in all of the meetings that were identified during this study. I also identified that in some meetings there seems to be overlap with multiple levels of managers and leaders being included in a particular meeting. Meetings can be an effective method for sharing information broadly across an organization and they can also provide a space for discussion and decision making for organizational leaders. However, as demonstrated through this research study, meetings can also pull middle managers away from their daily responsibilities and significantly restrict their ability to communicate effectively to their frontline employees.

Theme 3 magnified the importance of communication in operations organizations and also highlighted the critical role middle managers play in ensuring continuous communication at multiple levels throughout the organization as a part of their daily responsibilities. Study participants expressed frustration and feelings of distrust for senior leadership and the organization when communication is fractured and they do not receive mission critical information. Middle managers reported that foreign languages and trade specific language spoken by employees creates communication challenges for middle

managers and frontline employees. Finally, middle managers reflected on the pros and cons of meetings being a useful source of communication in a complex and dynamic work environment.

Theme 3 captures, in detail, the efforts of senior leadership and middle managers to maintain communication throughout the organization regarding a wide-variety of topics with varying levels of urgency, through many different methods of communication. In considering the conceptual framework for this study, it is important to note that communication across the organization is necessary for the dissemination of information from senior leaders to frontline employees. Breakdowns in communication prevent middle managers from having the information necessary to be able to mobilize staff to respond to changes or needs within the organization.

Theme 4

Middle managers acknowledge that they do not have the authority or resources to improve access to the learning opportunities frontline employees need for ongoing development.

Human capital theory (Becker, 1993) suggests that employees should have the capacity and the financial resources to be able to pursue their own professional development through educational advancement. Critiques of human capital theory (Au et al., 2008; Tan, 2014) call on the organization to assume its role in supporting ongoing employee development. The HR View of Resource Based View (Wright et al., 1994) acknowledges the employee's contributions to organizational performance and the organization's responsibility to provide the resources necessary to ensure the employees have the skills to advance organizational performance. Study participants also realize that as middle managers they do not have the ability to improve access (e.g., increase wages

or provide direct subsidies) to the resources frontline employees need to pursue the learning opportunities needed for development without the support of senior leadership.

Findings from this qualitative research study suggests that middle managers, given their proximity to frontline employees, are fully aware that their employees do not have the personal resources to pursue education and professional development outside of what is provided by the organization's workplace learning program. To that end, there were four areas that were illuminated through the data collection process that were connected to this theme: the process breakdown for requesting training, frontline employee accessibility to development opportunities limited by personal expense, the influence of middle managers in advocating for frontline employee development, and utilization of the university's tuition benefit program.

Multiple study participants spoke to communication and process breakdowns impeding their ability to advocate for employee participation in workplace learning or external training. Site observations confirmed that there is no signage within team rooms or training rooms that provide guidance to employees on the process to request internal or external training. Study participants also named these breakdowns in communication and process as one of the barriers preventing frontline employees from pursuing external learning opportunities for themselves. Xavier had this to say about the process for requesting training:

> So there is unfortunately, and I think we just exposed a hole. There's no process for employee engagement and training. We, as in leadership, have just expected any employee that wants to commit, to say they wanna commit and come and show that commitment. We just don't have an outreach program to say,

> Hey, team, these are your training opportunities. Take advantage of it. And that's outside of the external training, which we almost mandated, there is no process for sharing that information. I think we should have that. Like if we are truly advocating, and so maybe I'm not really advocating. I'm just waiting for people to take the responsibility themselves.

In the absence of a process, study participants described having intentions to independently implement workplace learning activities for their employees, but not having the time, skill, or resources to follow through. This issue is compounded when other emergent organizational issues take priority over the development of workplace learning activities. When asked about their biggest challenge as a manager, Mallory responded, “It's implementing a solid actionable training program for our frontline staff so that they can continue to gain valuable resources and expand in their expertise. Unfortunately, a lot of times we don't have the time to do that because we are still being reactive.” The lack of capacity of study participants to plan and advocate for training on behalf of the frontline employees and the lack of a clear process for frontline employees to follow negatively impacts frontline employee motivation to pursue developmental opportunities on their own.

Similarly, study participants reported instances where access to external training was restricted to only individuals that made the request to pursue training on their own or to individuals that were arbitrarily identified by university leadership through an unclear selection system for the training. Mallory noted, “So normally if employees are trying to communicate about training that they feel that they need, it's going to be reliant upon them having a good working relationship with their manager and feeling like they can

talk to that manager to request that." In both of these instances, where an employee advocates for their participation in a workplace learning activity or an employee is randomly identified by the organization to participate in a workplace learning activity, the fact that training is not accessible to the entire employee population is inequitable and inaccessible.

Study participants also acknowledged that there are situations where the availability of resources restrict their ability to ensure that every employee has access to the same training whether it is due to a limitation of available space for all employees to participate or if it is due to a limited technology. Rachel said, "Honestly, I would say lack of sufficient resources to accomplish our goals. Lack of technology, lack of tangible physical resources, unclear budget access. And I think those are really concrete barriers to efficiency." Limited resources create multi-layered challenges for study participants working to ensure all members of their team have the skills they need to successfully perform the duties of their job. The constrained resources within this university further exacerbates the issue of accessibility to workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees and complicates the day-to-day work of study participants.

Finally, study participants recounted their awareness of their ability to influence frontline employees' involvement in workplace learning activities based on their direct reporting relationship. Carter specifically spoke about a past manager encouraging him to pursue classes provided by his university employer, through the tuition benefit program. Based on his experience with his middle manager, Carter described feeling the same obligation to provide opportunities for his employees:

> I had an employee that came and wanted to go to trade school to specialize in their trade. And so I advocated for that employee. They had to, one, commit to the program to get their license. And then, two, they had to get a sign off from senior leadership. And so that employee began the training, I don't know that they are still going to it, but they definitely originally expressed interest 'cause they wanted their career development. And I just have to support anyone who wants to use education as a platform to get ahead. Just that's, I mean, that's how I did.

Carter reported taking advantage of the tuition benefit for his own professional development, however, the majority of the study participants reported that they did not have employees who had taken advantage of the tuition benefit for multiple reasons including a lack of availability for relevant courses and the competitiveness of program admission.

Study participants noted that the universities do not customarily have in-house training programs that are related to the work that frontline employees are doing in facilities maintenance, culinary, or hospitality professions. Richard noted, “We've had classes here and there, I say classes, but not courses here and there where we were asked to train others after we were trained, but nothing formal.” As study participants described, frontline employees require access to trade specific programs that will provide them skill development in their particular area of expertise. Because universities are focused on providing traditional academic experiences that differ from the direct service delivery roles of frontline employees, their curriculum does not account for those programs or opportunities. That said, frontline employees are restricted to workplace learning

programs provided by their department and they are not regularly pursuing development opportunities outside of their university and the tuition benefit provided by the university.

When speaking on the barriers that exist for frontline employees, study participants are acutely aware of the limitations that exist within the university systems and structures to be able to provide internal or external learning opportunities to frontline employees. Study participants demonstrated a higher level of compassion and a desire to improve the development opportunities for frontline employees because of their awareness of the needs of the employees. Although study participants have this awareness they reported not being in a position to be able to make a decision to authorize employees to pursue training outside of the university, if pursuing the training would have an impact on their day-to-day work schedule. Additionally, middle managers do not have the authority to be able to approve participation in an external training or to modify employee work schedules so that they can attend the training. Alena shared that only members of her senior leadership team have access to external training. She added, "We wouldn't even, yeah, we wouldn't, even be sending anybody else out. They don't even send anybody else out for extra training outside unless you just go to another university facility to cross-train or something like that". Barriers like restricting access to external training for frontline employees exist on multiple levels, preventing frontline employees from being able to fully take advantage of limited opportunities to refresh or learn new job skills.

Theme four identifies resource scarcity as one of the most significant challenges study participants face as they navigate their role overseeing frontline employees. Additionally, this theme highlights the influence middle managers can have on their

frontline employees pursuing professional development. Communication and process breakdowns within universities related to workplace learning activities prevent these opportunities from being distributed equitably to all frontline employees.

Further, study participants noted their awareness that frontline employees do not have the financial resources to pursue professional development opportunities outside of what is available through the university's workplace learning program. Despite having access to the employee tuition remission program, the universities do not offer college courses that will support skill development for frontline employees working in university operations. Although study participants are tasked with driving organizational performance through employee performance, study participants do have the necessary authority or resources to be able to supplement frontline employee professional development needs and subsequently the needs of the organization. Even in the midst of navigating these challenges, middle managers are engaged daily in providing on-the-job learning opportunities to the best of their ability.

Theme 5

Middle managers reported the benefits and barriers of structured and unstructured workplace learning in support of staff development and organizational performance. Middle managers noted the gap in skills needed for them to design and implement workplace learning for frontline employees.

To better understand how middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, it is essential to understand the landscape in which structured and unstructured workplace learning activities are currently available at the universities featured in this research study. It was important to better understand how much time study participants were spending developing and implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees on a regular basis. Understanding the

utilization of structured (formal) vs. unstructured (informal) workplace learning activities (Jacobs & Park, 2009) is essential to be able to draw conclusions about the usefulness of these activities. Structured workplace learning was defined as learning activities provided by the organization and facilitated with some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher (Jacobs & Parks, 2009).

Whereas, unstructured workplace learning was defined as learning activities that occur informally with no planning and some degree of involvement from a trainer or teacher (Jacobs & Parks, 2009). While every learning activity that is available to frontline employees is an opportunity for development, distinguishing between structured and unstructured workplace learning activities, lends transparency into how frequently planned learning activities - with clear objectives and opportunities for post-activity assessment are available. Also, structured workplace learning activities are largely planned for groups or teams as a whole, ensuring that all employees have access to the learning opportunity. In contrast, unstructured workplace learning often arises in response to an emergent need and is often between the middle manager and an individual employee or smaller group of employees, limiting the overall impact of the learning activity. For this study, it was necessary to determine the general content matter of the workplace learning activities occurring at the universities featured in this study, the purpose these activities served in employee skill development, and given their subject matter which of these activities were required for frontline employees to participate in.

Considering that middle managers are often taking strategic direction from the senior leaders that dictate the day-to-day priorities for frontline employees, it is important to understand how study participants view the university's prioritization of workplace

learning to support skill development for frontline employees to be able to carry out these directives. Richard shared that the university had not put a high enough value on training for frontline employees or leaders. He noted, “When I started, there wasn't a great value in formal training, but now there is but there's still a lot of informal on-the-job experiences that the team learns and then applies to their day-to-day.” He later reported during his interview that there had been some improvement in training opportunities for frontline employees during his tenure with the university, but that his experience over time demonstrated that the university does not consistently value workplace learning activities for frontline employees. After a moment of reflection he added, “So I don't think the university put a great value in training its frontline staff or leadership for that matter.” As Richard was processing our discussion during the interview, he concluded that despite there being a general commitment made at the senior leadership level to improving the workplace learning opportunities for his team, that the commitment from senior leadership had not been honored overall and that there was still room for improvement.

Similarly, Mallory attributed her inability to build an actionable workplace learning program to the lack of time and professional capacity she had available during the business day. She noted, “I'm actually not doing the number of hours of training that I probably should do because I just don't have the capacity to meet that demand.” Her perspective was that limited capacity in her day-to-day work was preventing her from providing meaningful workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees. Her reflection highlights that not only is the quality of the workplace learning activities compromised by her limited capacity, but also she is unable to deliver the number of

workplace learning activities that she should to ensure employees are adequately trained. These limitations translate directly to frontline employees not receiving the support they need for ongoing professional development.

Au et al. (2008) noted that frontline employees face many barriers to learning even with the opportunities available through an organization's workplace learning program. Study participants reported the utilization of various languages as a barrier for workplace learning. The fact that some frontline employees do not have fluency in English creates a challenge for study participants who are unable to communicate effectively with frontline employees in their primary language. Language barriers also prevent frontline employees from being able to learn and apply workplace learning material in an environment where the materials are only available in English. Chris noted his awareness of the multiple languages that are spoken among the workforce and his effort to provide training materials in multiple languages so that his employees can follow along and take advantage of the training that is available to them.

> So, I mean, just like everywhere in America, you know, it's beautiful, but half of my staff speak Spanish and half of my staff speak Haitian Creole, and I only speak English...I mean it's, you know, it forces you to, just like anything in management, overcome some different obstacles, right? So, now, I'm doing trainings and I gotta...when I do a training, I have to print out everything in English, in French, and in Spanish, right? So I can make sure that all of my team has everything, and make sure that everybody has the information given to them.

Even though training materials can be provided in multiple languages, the inability to communicate with employees in their primary language clearly can result in a lack of

comprehension of training materials and also create other workplace issues, hazards, and barriers to workplace learning.

Similarly, study participants reported that technology is a barrier to workplace learning for frontline employees in multiple ways. In environments where workplace learning activities are primarily available on-demand in an asynchronous multi-media format, because the organization has shifted away from in-person training in a post-COVID context, study participants noted that frontline employees may not have access to an available computer terminal to access the workplace learning activities. In all of the team and training rooms observed during the site observations, there are not enough computer terminals for each employee on an average size team to have access to their own device. The limited availability of computer terminals further complicates the task for middle managers planning and implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Limited computer access also compromises the amount of time each employee has access to a computer terminal to engage in workplace learning.

The lack of technological competency also compounds the work of study participants who are trying to implement workplace learning with limited resources and in compressed work schedules. The use of technology for workplace learning also creates a barrier for frontline employees due to a lack of technological competency and low motivation to learn new technologies (Kyndt et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2006). Malachi described having to train and retrain frontline employees on the work management program utilized by employees on their university issued cell phones. Malachi reflected on the necessity to train and retrain his employees saying,

> “So I'll just take them to the side like, "Hey did you get this?" And they're like, "Okay, I got it now." I was like, all right, but if you have an issue or something pops up or you forget, come back to me and then we'll work it out again.”

Study participants stated that having to complete regular retraining on the technologies used by frontline employees on a daily basis, takes away from their ability to provide other essential workplace learning activities to their teams. Overall, study participants are keenly aware of the negative impacts the utilization of technology has on their day-to-day productivity, frontline employee work performance, and their ability to develop and deploy workplace learning activities. Ensuring study participants have the skill and resources necessary to design workplace learning activities is absolutely critical to reducing the need for retraining, increasing the impact of workplace learning activities, supporting the employee’s application of the content, and the overall outcomes of the workplace learning activity.

Study participants reported that workplace learning design or instructional design is an important aspect of providing quality workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Study participants reported thinking about multiple ways to expand the offering and the delivery of workplace learning activities regularly, but not necessarily having the skill, the time, or the resources to make these adjustments to the program. Study participants who reported having the responsibility of designing workplace learning activities also noted that they are able to identify when there are skill gaps among frontline employees. They noted that employees with skill deficiencies are in need of access to a more in-depth and hands-on method of learning outside of a lecture-style or a pre-recorded training, which has become a common method of delivering training

post-COVID. Isaiah expressed his desire to incorporate more skill based learning activities into his workplace learning program:

> Getting educational training, props, and help building out our training. I think that PowerPoints are good training. It's a good way to do things, but not everybody can take information from a screen and digest it. Some people digest stuff by motion and hands and doing things right. Physically doing it. So I feel that's a big thing, right? If I could have more hands-on stuff and whatnot that we could get through to this better through those to those people that don't necessarily have that best learning skill of finger or screen to brain.

Study participants noted that it is important for frontline employees, especially those in trades, to be able to learn hands-on with their tools or the systems they will need to operate regularly, to develop the skills that they need to be able to effectively complete their work tasks. Unfortunately, when study participants recognize these gaps, but do not have the skill, time, or resources to address these gaps, the cycle of not providing adequate workplace learning resources to frontline employees is perpetuated.

To better understand the amount of time study participants are currently spending developing and implementing workplace learning activities, study participants were asked to provide the average amount of time they spend per week developing and facilitating workplace learning activities. Responses from all 17 study participants are captured in Table 13 to visually demonstrate the variation in time across participants. Five study participants reported spending 10-15 hours a week developing workplace learning activities. In contrast, 11 study participants reported spending less than two hours a week developing workplace learning activities. One study participant reported

that the amount of time they spend developing workplace learning activities varies according to the demand of the day-to-day workload from week-to-week. Similarly, three study participants reported spending 10-20 hours facilitating workplace learning activities.

Table 13

Hours Study Participants Spend Developing and Facilitating Workplace Learning Activities for Frontline Employees Per Week

Participant	Developing	Facilitating	Participant	Developing	Facilitating
1	2	2	**10**	10	6
2	2	< 1	**11**	1	1
3	0	0	**12**	1	4
4	< 1	< 1	**13**	15	20
5	< 1	< 1	**14**	15-20	10
6	1-1.5	1-1.5	**15**	1-1.5	2
7	1-1.5	1-1.5	**16**	varies	varies
8	0	2	**17**	10	5
9	10	10			

All five of the study participants that reported spending an average of 10 hours developing workplace learning activities, also reported spending 5-10 or more hours facilitating workplace learning. In some cases, that is half of a standard 40 hour work week. Although an explanation was not requested of middle managers as to why they were spending nearly half of their work week developing and facilitating workplace learning, it can be inferred that the employees reporting to these managers are in need of

ongoing development for one reason or another. Hannah noted that she spends upwards of 20 hours a week developing and facilitating mostly unstructured training because her team is new and they did not receive any training on the standard operating procedures (SOP's) for the organization, so she has to spend time on-the-job training employees to carry out standard tasks. She added, "That's the hard part, it's also like, there's no formal training. So it's providing the training when they need it. But these people just started. And they're not up to speed. They don't know what to do". When middle managers are leading a workforce with such dire developmental needs and they must concentrate so much of their time and energy to supporting these needs, it either results in the middle managers having to work outside of business hours to keep up with the workplace demand or it means that middle managers' attention is consumed by team development and they are forced to neglect other responsibilities of their role.

In stark contrast, 12 study participants reported spending less than 5 hours developing and facilitating workplace learning activities, including unstructured workplace learning per week. The teams of these 12 middle managers are engaging in significantly less workplace learning activities. The absence of middle managers conducting on-the-job coaching or planning formal training sheds a light on what could be a detrimental practice for these teams. With limited access to workplace learning, employee skills go undeveloped and organizational goals (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016; Wright et al., 1994; Wright et al., 2001) are unmet. This very distinct gap in time spent developing and facilitating workplace learning activities further demonstrates that despite middle managers being best positioned within the organization to develop and implement workplace learning for their frontline teams, the demand for their time in other parts of

the operation, does not allow for them to focus on workplace learning activities for their frontline employees, which is a critical piece of their role as middle managers.

Time spent providing frontline employees on-the-job training or coaching is considered unstructured (or informal) workplace learning (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Marsick et al., 2017). In contrast, time spent providing frontline employees training in a classroom or synchronous, virtual training is considered structured (or formal) workplace learning (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Marsick et al., 2017). Study participants were asked to identify the percentage of formal and informal workplace provided by the university. Table 14 provides a visual representation of the distribution of study participant responses. Fifteen study participants reported that 50%-100% of the training provided to their frontline employees was informal and unstructured (on-the-job, coaching, mentoring, etc.).

Table 14

Comparison of Formal vs. Informal Workplace Learning Provided by the University

Middle Manager Reflections on Percentage of Informal vs. Formal Workplace Learning					
Participant	**Formal**	**Informal**	**Participant**	**Formal**	**Informal**
1	20	80	**10**	20	80
2	90	10	**11**	50	50
3	75	25	**12**	30	70
4	50	50	**13**	25	75
5	45	55	**14**	40	60
6	30	70	**15**	20	80
7	40	60	**16**	5	95
8	40	60	**17**	5	95
9	25	75			

Study participants acknowledged that on-the-job training was the most commonly used form of unstructured workplace learning employed by and most preferred by middle managers due to the flexibility to make any moment a learning moment without the requirement of developing training materials. Study participants also noted that the nature of the work in operations requires an immediate response when an issue arises or a priority is changed, thus making unstructured workplace learning much easier to deploy in real time. Xavier expressed a concern that the use of informal learning (unstructured workplace learning) was too high among their frontline employees and that he has a preference for employees to engage in structured (formal) workplace learning over unstructured (informal). Xavier also cited a lack of time, resource constraints, and the size of the staff population as reasons for not developing and implementing more structured workplace learning activities, despite their criticism of employees participating in unstructured workplace learning activities too frequently.

Please note another correlation to the amount of structured (formal) workplace learning activities that are being implemented by the universities featured in this study. When asked about the percentage of structured (formal) workplace learning activities frontline employees are required to participate in, the relationship between the frequency of structured workplace learning and the content of the structured workplace activities is important to consider. The significance of this relationship is further demonstrated by the breakdown of mandatory training provided by study participants (shown in Table 15).

Table 15

Mandatory Training for Frontline Employees Required by the University

Type of Mandatory Training	Frequency of Response by Study Participants
Regular Safety Training (Monthly or Quarterly) and Annual Compliance Training	8
No Mandatory Training	2
Licensure Related Training Only	2
Annual Compliance Training Only	3
Regular Safety Training Only	2

Eight study participants reported that their frontline employees were required to participate in annual compliance training and regular safety training. At a minimum, this translates into 14-20 hours per year. Seven study participants reported that their frontline employees were required to participate in annual compliance training, regular safety training, or continuing education courses required for licensure. At a minimum, this translates into a minimum of 3-12 hours of training per year.

Caleb and Chris reported that after new hire orientation, their employees were not required to participate in any mandatory training. For this frontline employee population, this could translate to zero time spent in workplace learning per year. This also means that if an employee has been working for this university for 10 years, that they have not received any required refresher training for safety or compliance purposes. Universities are so decentralized that they don't provide any guidance to middle managers or their employees about courses that should aid in their development. The onus is on the middle managers and the employees themselves to seek out professional development opportunities on their own. This is an unfortunate predicament given the time, resource,

capacity, and other challenges study participants reported as they are juggling so many different needs, all at once.

Five study participants reported that the only mandatory structured workplace learning activities that frontline employees were required to participate in were safety trainings or other compliance based trainings (e.g., sexual harassment, performance management, or new employee orientation). Even at 20 hours a year participating in mandatory compliance and safety training, that only amounts to a little over an hour per month of training that is not job specific and does not necessarily contribute to frontline employee skill development. Study participants have made it abundantly clear that from their vantage point frontline employees are not engaged in enough workplace learning activities to be able to keep up with the demands of the organization or to be able to maintain skills that keep them competitive in the labor market. Middle managers must be given the tools and time to be able to develop workplace learning programs that address the skill gaps frontline employees have to build a frontline employee population that drives organizational performance.

Theme 5 brings into view the limited value organizations place on workplace learning based on the perspective of middle managers. As middle managers struggle to balance all of their responsibilities on a daily basis, including planning for and implementing workplace learning for their frontline teams, they are often also struggling to find the time or the resources to be able to meet these expectations. Having to figuratively contend with the organization to obtain the resources needed to implement workplace learning activities has adverse effects on middle managers motivation for implementing workplace learning activities. Challenges presented by employee language

barriers and limited technological competencies are elevated as barriers for middle managers working to implement workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Similarly, not having the technical skills to plan and implement workplace learning activities also compound the challenges for middle managers who want to help their employee development, but are unable to do so.

The impact of time on workplace learning manifests in a variety of ways in Theme 5. The extreme variations of time middle managers are spending developing and implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees illuminates the significant disparity in middle manager work responsibilities and the very little time that they have available to prioritize the workplace learning activities for their employees. In contrast, it also highlights instances where a lack of structured workplace learning causes middle managers to spend too much time trying to get employees up to speed. Finally, the contrast in the amount of time employees spend immersed in structured vs. unstructured workplace learning was detailed to further demonstrate that the universities are not investing resources into developing structured workplace learning programs that comprehensively support frontline employee professional development needs and that the majority of workplace learning activities for frontline employees are provided through unstructured workplace learning, like on-the-job training.

Perspectives from study participants make a desperate plea for organizational leaders to prioritize workplace learning by allocating resources to middle managers to support the development of their frontline employees. As middle managers work towards finding balance in developing and providing workplace learning activities for frontline

employees, it is important to also understand the challenges frontline employees are navigating as they consider engaging in workplace learning activities.

Theme 6

Middle managers acknowledge that as a result of earning low wages, frontline employees work through personal circumstances that negatively impact their capacity to engage in workplace learning activities in comparison to other work groups.

Theme six captures study participant's understanding of the dynamics that occur at the intersection between the working and personal living experiences of frontline employees and how these dynamics impact frontline employees capacity to engage in workplace learning and to meet performance expectations. As literature details, (Harding et al., 2014, Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Yang, 2010) middle managers are positioned structurally within the organization to directly manage frontline employees. Middle managers are deeply entrenched in the work and world of frontline employees. To that end, study participants articulated an awareness of the realities their frontline employees are facing professionally and personally as a result of their position within the university and the limitations they experience due to their low-wage status (Au et al., 2008; Maxwell, 2006). Study participants detailed the ways in which they provide accommodations to their team members to ensure they are able to carry out their job duties. This theme provides a summary of how middle managers tend to and supplement the needs of frontline employees.

Many of the study participants reflected on their own personal experiences working their way up from a tradesperson role to a middle manager. Study participants connected their experience with promotion to a former supervisor or manager who

mentored them or connected them to workplace learning resources (like the university's tuition remission program) that helped them develop the skills needed to advance professionally. Hardy reflected on his experience as frontline employee being mentored by a middle manager:

> Like, there came a point where I was speaking with my supervisor and I was telling her, I was like, man, this just can't be, this can't be life. Like this can't be the end, and I was three years into about three or four years into my first position as a custodian. And she was like, "well, there's classes here." And she walked me through the process to begin classes in the business school.

Knowing firsthand what their employees are working through, some from experience and others from observation, middle managers are attuned to the needs of frontline employees in ways that other professional staff and leaders are not. More importantly this theme illuminates the hardships frontline employees endure on a regular basis, as told by middle managers.

Study participants reflected on the fact that in many situations frontline employees are expected to be available to provide emergency response services to university events, activities, and acts of nature (e.g inclement weather events like winter snow storms or hurricane events) that other employees who are not in a frontline status do not have to. Carter noted:

> Whatever happens at the university doesn't affect our status. We still come in, we still act as if the... it's a regular workday and passing that down to the employees from leadership, you forget that employees don't, aren't sharing the same benefits that you may have. And so they have to still get in regardless of what happens,

> what's going on out in the world. They still have to leave their families regardless of what's happening, regardless of what's going on in the world, even though their families may not have to, may not be well, may have to still be home, they have to now find a way to get to work and supplement care for their family. And that's difficult for frontline staff who are making minimum, level of minimum wages.

What Carter describes when he talks about the benefits that others may have is the inequality of university policies and procedures that require frontline employees to work in an on-call status when emergency events arise. These changes in operations increase the hardship on frontline employees, who are the lowest paid population of the university. Frontline employees are essential workers (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021) that are required to report for duty at any time the university determines that there is a need for operational services to be provided - 24 hours, 7 days, a week. Having to report for duty, in addition to an already assigned shift, can cause frontline employees to incur unforeseen expenses attributed to commuting to and from work, having to identify childcare, or they may lose money if they are unable to report to a second job that they maintain to earn a living wage.

In another example, Hannah described the university modifying its work from home policy in 2021, requiring middle managers and frontline employees to return to campus full time. She added, “we were just getting past COVID and there were a lot of members of leadership, not frontline staff that were, this is my opinion, that were abusing work from home privileges because frontline employees never had that privilege to work from home in the first place.” She noted the lack of awareness and insensitivity of leadership to make a public announcement about this change in policy, while not

realizing it was clearly pointing to benefits frontline employees are not allowed to take advantage of. She also described the negative impact on frontline employee morale as a result of the announcement of this change in policy.

Similarly, Caleb described a policy change for employees performing work tasks in the campus buildings that are not central to campus. Historically, frontline employees had been given access to carts to travel the longer distances beyond central campus, while transporting tools and supplies to perform those duties. The policy change eliminated the use of carts to the outlying parts of the campus. About this change, Caleb said, "A new policy...is gonna have a direct impact on my shop's operations and how we manage to work. And so, I don't agree with that. It is what it is. I have to hold folks accountable and I have to enforce it." From his perspective as a middle manager, university administration provided a justification for the change in the policy, but did not consider the direct impact on middle managers and frontline employees to navigate this change. He also described his discomfort with having to enforce a change in policy that he did not agree with.

Caleb noted that this policy change will slow employee performance down because it will take significantly longer for employees to walk to these outlying locations than it would for them to drive a cart. Additionally, this policy change places an additional physical burden on frontline employees to have to carry large pieces of equipment and heavy tools that they previously did not have to physically carry. As demonstrated by these examples, middle managers are sandwiched in between university leaders making decisions based on a business need and the practical implications for their frontline employee teams. While they do not always agree with these changes in operations or new policies, middle managers enforce these new expectations, navigating

any backlash or resistance from frontline employees, while seeing firsthand the impact to the frontline employee teams, and having no power to change the policy.

In a similar manner to middle managers being restricted by resources to develop workplace learning resources for frontline employees, middle managers describe the barriers created for frontline employees engaging in workplace learning (during and outside of business hours) due to low wages. Hardy described the personal circumstances of a frontline employee who works a second full time job because they do not make a living wage at their primary place of employment (Au et al., 2008; Blau et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2006). They reflected on the employee's struggle trying to manage two full-time schedules within the course of a 24-hour day and a 16-hour business day. Hardy shared their understanding of the employee's challenges and need to work a second job to supplement their finances. However, they also acknowledged that as much as they would like to support the employee in their need to earn more income, that the business needs of the university must be prioritized and that exceptions cannot be made for individual employees who are in this situation. Hardy expressed disappointment and frustration that there are other frontline employees in the same position, trying to manage working a second job to break even financially.

The demand on frontline employees to have to juggle multiple jobs to be able to earn a living wage also creates barriers for that frontline employee to be able to afford professional development (Becker, 1976) outside of what is provided by their employer, in this case the university. Au et al. (2008) noted that when financial hardships occur for frontline employees, personal development drops to a last priority. Additionally, study participants reflected on transportation, travel times, and work schedules combining to

create a barrier to obtaining workplace learning outside of the day-to-day business day. The District of Columbia consistently ranks in the top 10 worst rush hour traffic in the US (US News & World Report, 2023) further deterring frontline employees from pursuing training and professional development outside of the workplace. Some Middle managers noted that if they had the ability to make adjustments to someone's schedule to allow them to depart work early to participate in external learning opportunities, they would. However, in most cases it was not their decision as to whether an adjustment could be made to a schedule to accommodate a frontline employee's learning needs.

The perspectives detailed for Theme Six demonstrate that middle managers are acutely aware of their employees' capabilities and needs in ways that senior leaders within the university are not. The skill competencies and skill gaps at the frontline employee level are on a spectrum and it is the middle manager's job to know where each employee falls and what skill development they need to be successful. Theme six reflections demonstrate that of all of the employees within an organization, frontline employees are the employees who most need access to workplace learning activities due to the compounding personal circumstances attributed to their low-wage status. As affirmed by this study, middle managers are aware that frontline employees are often most overlooked when it comes to their needs due to their status within the organization. As middle managers work to balance how all of the underlying circumstances show up in the workplace, they are acutely aware of the complexity that these circumstances add to the execution of day-to-day responsibilities. The demands on middle managers often prevent them from being able to take the time out to design workplace learning activities or advocate for workplace learning resources that will allow their employees to fully

develop to the point needed for optimal organizational performance. The barriers named in this study that align with this theme make it abundantly clear that middle managers are best positioned to take action to benefit from my employees and they should be equipped to do so.

Disconfirming Data

In qualitative research, disconfirming data or nonconfirming data represents data among a complete data set that does not align with other patterned data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Following a process to identify disconfirming data is "considered a valuable strategy for assessing the credibility or validity of qualitative research claims" (Antin et al., 2014, p.212). As described by Antin et al., (2014) after multiple rounds of coding, assessing code grouping for themes, I went back to review interview transcripts, site observation checklists, and document review checklists to ensure disconfirming data was identified and included in this chapter. Upon completing this review, there were two areas that presented disconfirming data: gender and impact of study location. The section that follows highlights the disconfirming data collected and its relevance to this qualitative study.

Gender

The interview protocol for this study did not specifically prompt study participants to frame their experiences in the context of gender. However, through the pre-interview questionnaire, I gathered that there were 12 men and 5 women participants. During the site visits at three of the four universities featured in this study, I observed there are a majority of men employed in frontline and managerial roles at these institutions. Among the five women participants, there was not a consensus on workplace

experience that was related to gender or experiences related to implemented workplace learning for their frontline employees that was related to gender. Sarah was the only participant to make a reference to her gender. Sarah described her perception that her academic experience was not considered valuable to peer managers or to employees with less experience. She noted that she will often have the answer to an employee's question or will know where something is located, but her employees will avoid asking her - by waiting for a male manager to become available or by intentionally going above her to a higher ranking male supervisor to address the need.

> Researcher: Do you think your employees consider you a leader in the shop?
>
> Sarah: Yes and no. And I think indirectly, I think a lot of it has to do with me being a woman in the trades.

Sarah makes a direct correlation between her ability to lead her teams and her gender. If her employees are not willing to take directives from her, it is very likely that her ability to lead the team through unstructured learning opportunities, like 1-1 coaching on the job site, is also limited. Because the other women participants did not mention similar experiences, there is no data to compare to Sarah's experiences, but it is important to highlight her experiences given the goal of this study to understand middle manager experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

Impact of Location

This study was based in Washington DC. The capital of the United States is the seat of the Federal Government - responsible for establishing policy and setting best practices for industries from education, food service, communication, defense, and many more. At the time that the study was designed, I decided (along with the dissertation committee) to delimit the study by organization type (e.g., 2-year or 4-year universities)

and geographical location (e.g., Washington DC regional area) because I first experienced the problem of practice within this specific organizational context, in the identified region. None of the study participants make a direct reference to Washington DC. More specifically, none of the study participants made any correlations between the context of working in Washington DC and their experiences implementing workplace learning for their frontline teams. Although the interview protocol did not specifically ask participants to consider how working in Washington DC impacts their experiences, there are three commonalities that surfaced in the data collection and analysis phases of this study. First, all of the schools that participated in this study have more than 10,000 students. Second, three of the four universities featured in this study have similar sized staff populations. Finally, all of the universities have a similar configuration for their operations units as demonstrated through the document review. These three factors are important to understanding the data collected for this study. While the context of these universities is not exactly the same, it can be surmised that because study participants are working in similar organizational structures that have similar experiences related to implementing workplace learning for their frontline employee teams. Utilizing the experiences of this study, can inform expectations for middle managers nationwide in university settings, but in other industries.

Summary

This qualitative research study was a process of inquiry into how middle managers in higher education operations understand their role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Chapter 4 presented the findings of this qualitative research study. This chapter established the purpose of this study, by establishing the

study with the research question and a description of the study methodology. A description of the organizational context in which the research was conducted, and a breakdown of the participants demographics was detailed. Finally, data gathered from 17 semi-structured interviews with middle managers, a review of 18 organizational documents, and site observations at three of four universities in Washington DC was analyzed, resulting in six themes being identified as an outcome of this qualitative research study.

The six themes presented in Chapter 4 highlight the role middle managers play in developing team members and team culture, challenges related to broken organizational and communications processes, the most common methods of workplace learning employed within the universities featured in this study, and the challenges frontline employees face engaging with workplace learning and accessing external professional development training. The findings of this study highlight the positive ways middle managers embody the mission of the institutions they serve, while navigating the complexities of the organization, and supporting the needs of the teams they lead. The findings of this study also highlights the opportunities for improvement at an organizational and senior leadership level to impact positive change for frontline employee workplace learning experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This basic qualitative study sought to investigate how middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area. Given the essential role that middle managers play in organizations (Harding et al., 2014), this study sought to fill a gap in previous scholarly discourse to specifically focus on the role of middle managers and their direct impact on frontline employee development (Kyndt et al., 2014). The research question for this study was: "How do middle managers understand their role in implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees?" The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the findings of this study in the following sections: interpretation of findings, limitations, contributions and recommendations, and implications for future research.

Central to the findings of this study was a unique perspective of middle manager experiences that gives voice to how middle managers navigate the demanding variety of job responsibilities on a day-to-day basis, as they encounter the systemic barriers they identified as impediments to the enforcement of leadership directives, the development of team culture, and to the implementation of workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Watson (2008) found that middle managers are often in subjugated positions that compromise their sense of personal security, cause them to abandon ethical principles, and display heightened anxiety and insecurity. On the contrary, this study demonstrated that middle managers rise to the occasion with tremendous self-assurance and a sense of purpose as they navigate challenges with flexibility and innovation. Middle managers understand their responsibility to translate leadership directives into

work tasks for their employees, often without an opportunity to provide their perspective to leadership from their experience in the field or their organizational vantage point. Despite the challenges they face operating resource-scare organizations or privately reconciling their own internal frustrations with organizational change, middle managers take ownership of their obligation to show up and advocate for the development of their team. Finally, middle managers acknowledge that often they do not have the time or the technical skill to adequately develop workplace learning activities for their teams, resulting in a limited overall investment in workplace learning activities for frontline employees.

Interpretation of the Findings

This basic qualitative study sought to deepen our understanding of how middle managers view the scope of their role, how they directly engage with employees, how they understand their employee's learning needs, and what workplace learning practices are common for their university. Past empirical research (Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968) has highlighted the role of middle managers without isolating and elaborating on their experiences implementing workplace learning activities for their frontline employee teams. An analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews, site observations, and a review of organizational documents yielded four key findings, each pointing to a different aspect of middle managers' experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

The findings of this study validate past studies and elevate four findings that expand our scholarly understanding of middle manager's experiences implementing workplace learning for their teams. First, the study found that the organizational context

drives the prioritization of workplace learning, limiting middle manager's autonomy and resources for planning workplace learning activities for their teams. Middle managers are at the mercy of the organizational processes and the direction of senior leadership, reducing the level of agency and autonomy middle managers have in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Second, the study identified that upwards communication between middle managers and senior leaders is severely broken. This failure in process prevents middle managers and their employees from being able to provide critical insights to inform senior leadership of issues occurring at the frontline level, contribute to decision making, and support process development at the organizational level.

Third, this study highlighted the dynamism of the role of the middle manager and their essential nature in maintaining business operations - expanding our understanding of the investment middle managers make to cultivate a sense of belonging among their team. Finally, this study identified the deficiency in middle manager competency in developing, planning, and implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Without the proper training to be able to execute this function, middle managers are missing an opportunity to provide structured and unstructured workplace learning activities that address employee needs, meet employee development goals, and support the achievement of organizational performance goals. The interpretation of the findings that follows threads together the outcomes of this study in relationship to relevant empirical literature and the conceptual framework for this study.

Finding 1: Organizational Context Drives Prioritization of Workplace Learning

The literature review and justification for this study detailed the challenges organizations have faced in the last five years, due to external factors causing major internal interruptions in operations and requiring organizations to rapidly adjust to protect operational continuity. First, the COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations globally to modify operations due to delays in the supply chain, impacts of the Great Resignation (Tessema et al., 2022), labor shortages, and resource scarcity (Mariscano et al., 2020). Now, in the United States, organizations are reacting, seemingly daily, to the impacts to our societal infrastructure as policy changes, massive layoffs, increased tariffs on imports, and ridiculous inflation is enacted by the current presidential administration (Center for American Progress, 2025). Universities have had to modify operations and reallocate resources due to the elimination of government agencies, federal funding, and other executive orders that impact business operations (Citrin and Stella, 2025; Moody, 2025). Please note that this study concludes at a time when organizations are again forced into a position to assess its operating practices and reprioritize its resources.

In organizations, including institutions of higher education, the resources budgeted for learning and development are reduced when there are other organizational priorities that must take precedence (Bahlis & Tourville, 2004). In 2025, approximately 600 colleges and universities in the United States had to modify operations to account for the reduction of more than $7 billion in grant funding (Center for American Progress, 2025), negatively impacting operational budgets, student enrollment, and a host of other programmatic resources. Wright et al., (2001) noted that “In times of plenty, firms easily justify expenditures on training, staffing, reward, and employee involvement systems, but

when faced with financial difficulties, such HR systems fall prey to the earliest cutbacks" (Wright et al., 2001, p. 701). When departments consider where to prioritize spending in times of financial instability, oftentimes the learning and development of their employees is deferred, if not eliminated altogether. In other words, the operating context of the organization dictates the prioritization of workplace learning for its employees. When the organization is operating optimally and without significant internal and external stressors, resources are more readily available to be allocated to workplace learning. The inverse is what organizations are experiencing today. When the organization's resources are scarce due to internal and external stressors, resources are deallocated from workplace learning.

This study affirmed that in these times of resource constraint that middle managers are often wedged in the middle - working to achieve the strategic goals of the organization and lead operations at the frontline level (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Study participants noted that fewer resources translates into fewer workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees. Resource constraints have a domino effect on study participants by limiting the financial resources needed to support workplace learning activities, but also by negatively impacting the study participant's available time to focus on developing and implementing workplace learning activities. When these situations occur, study participants are left to do the best they can without the resources needed and also without leadership support to identify alternative solutions to address the workplace learning needs of frontline employees.

The following sub-sections highlight the ways in which this study found the organizational context to impact middle managers' role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Although data collection for this study was conducted

before these recent impacts to higher education, the findings are indicative of how middle manager experiences were shaped previously and will be impacted in the coming years.

Senior Leaders Do Not Set Strategic Direction for Employee Development

The findings of this study demonstrated that as organizations shift in response to external factors (Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968) that senior leaders are not thinking about workplace learning as a strategic priority for the benefits of improving employee workplace experiences during these times of transition, maintaining or improving job skills, or meeting performance expectations. This study found that the oversight of the organization's investment in workplace learning is not regularly visible to senior leaders in a strategic way, creating a gap between leadership expectations and middle managers and employees ability to meet these expectations. The participants of this study reported that senior leaders will often defer the responsibility of workplace learning to middle managers without understanding the perspective of middle manager experiences from the frontline or without ensuring middle managers have the capability to develop and implement workplace learning activities. When senior leaders are disengaged from supporting the workplace learning processes that help employees improve their job skills, middle managers are forced to reconcile deficiencies in employee performance without any formal or technical guidance, leaving them to patch together inadequate workplace learning activities with the goal of helping employees maintain and improve job skills.

This study found that at four universities in the Washington DC regional area that there is no real investment of time and energy at the senior leadership level in devising a strategy for workplace learning activities or guiding middle managers in devising a strategy for workplace learning activities. Senior leaders have a perspective of the

organization and how external stressors impact the organization that middle managers do not have. Instead of utilizing this perspective to help develop workplace learning strategy, study participants reported that it is more common that when a problem emerges, senior leaders will react by requesting the immediate implementation of a workplace learning activity to address the perceived skill gap associated with the emergent problem. This approach to providing employees access to a workplace learning activity reactively does not address the real, systemic issues that caused the problem. Nor does it address the ever-expanding inefficiency of the workplace learning program overall. Senior leaders are not aware of the challenges middle managers encounter implementing workplace learning activities. Senior leaders must provide strategic direction and resources to support middle managers efforts implementing workplace learning activities.

Resources Allocated to Workplace Learning Are Misinvested

An investment in workplace learning can only be effective if the organization prioritizes resources for the activities in alignment with its strategic priorities. Human capital theory (Becker, 1994), as described by Au et al., (2008) posited that investments in workplace learning yield mutual benefits for the organization and the employee as it pertains to the employee's utilization of new or improved jobs skills and the impact of these skills on organizational performance. The HR View of Resource Based Theory (Wright et al., 1994) suggests that the organization has a responsibility to provide workplace learning activities for its employees. Among the four universities featured in this study, the findings demonstrate that the funding for workplace learning is misinvested among the workforce and that the funding is not sufficient enough to address the learning needs of all employees.

Study participants reported that there are not enough financial resources allocated to be able to provide workplace learning resources to each employee. Organizational resources are misinvested and do not reach the employees that actually need them, as a trickle down effect of the organization lacking strategic direction for workplace learning. This study confirmed that frontline employees do not have the financial resources to be able to supplement their workplace learning with externally provided learning resources (i.e. pursuing certifications, trade programs, or higher education) and that their dependence upon workplace learning is significant. Therefore, funding for workplace learning activities should be prioritized at the institutional level to ensure the ongoing development of employee job skills.

The study found that often in university operations, the demand for workplace learning resources at the frontline employee level is often greater than the availability of resources for learning opportunities, resulting in the inefficient distribution of workplace learning activities to all employees. The Association for Talent Development reported in 2023, the average cost for workplace learning for each employee was $1,220 (ATD, 2023). This study identified that there are a number of factors that impact the fluctuation in funding allocated to workplace learning, but the organizational needs (as driven by external factors to the organization) and the number of employees of an institution, among other things can cause this average cost to fluctuate up or down. Even in a situation where an organization made $1,220 available to each employee, the cost of the average conference, training, or academic course exceeds this allocation and would prevent frontline employees from being able to utilize the benefit. To optimize the limited available resources for workplace learning, organizations tend to offer group training or

to only provide reactive training to meet employee's emergent needs. When organizations misinvest their workplace learning allocation, a cycle is created that does not allow for resources to be properly allocated to address the actual workplace learning needs for frontline employees.

Workplace Learning Activities Do Not Meet Employee Needs

This study found that the workplace learning activities that are available to employees are not designed to take into consideration the unique workplace learning needs or the specific job skill needs of employees and therefore do not meet their development needs. Not prioritizing strategic planning for workplace learning at an organizational level results in a misalignment in how an organization's available resources for workplace learning are utilized. Study participants described not having a formal assessment to determine the learning needs of their employees (outside of on-site observations). In this scenario, any investment in workplace learning is not guaranteed to address the workplace learning needs for frontline employees, if the workplace learning activities are not designed with their needs in mind. While safety training does provide essential refresher knowledge on critical operations topics, it does not directly address frontline employee learning needs specific to their role. Simply planning for compliance training does not meet the ongoing developmental needs of the employees within the organization (Wotschalk, 2020). Similarly, compliance training does not provide development for specific job skills and therefore does nothing to close the skill gap for frontline employees.

This study found that in the absence of adequate funding for workplace learning activities, all four universities featured in this study are heavily dependent upon safety

and compliance training, provided by middle managers, as a primary form of workplace learning for frontline employees. This study also illuminated the dominating practice of study participants to engage with employees through unstructured (on-the-job) workplace learning instead of structured workplace learning. This means that study participants are engaging with employees directly at the worksite and in many cases engaging with a limited number of employees, instead of training the entire team. Concentrating workplace learning among a few employees at a time creates a situation where study participants have to consistently train and retrain employees because workplace learning content is not delivered in a structured format to all employees of the team, in the same manner. This practice may address the need in the moment, but does not address the long-term workplace learning needs and is not an effective strategy for managing workplace learning for frontline employees.

These breakdowns in process and resourcing are largely due to the fact that workplace learning is not an organizational priority. Even without a formal assessment tool, middle managers have a better sense of their employees' learning and development needs. Middle managers require the guidance of senior leaders to establish workplace learning as a strategic priority and middle managers require the resources to be able to implement workplace learning activities that meet their employee needs, even in times when financial resources are scarce.

In summary, this finding illuminates how the organizational context drives the prioritization (or deprioritization) of workplace learning in organizations. As organizations scale their operations in response to external and internal factors, it is critical that senior leaders are mindful of the impacts operational changes have to the

availability and design of workplace learning resources for employees. This study demonstrates that frontline employees are more dependent on workplace learning resources provided by their employer than other employees within the organization. Therefore, organizations must be intentional about responding to the unique learning needs of all employees, but especially to those of frontline employees, through structured and unstructured workplace learning activities. Further, this study demonstrates the importance of organizations planning to provide more than compliance and safety training to truly address the professional development needs of frontline employees.

Finding 2: Upwards Communication between Middle Managers and Senior Leadership Is Broken

Middle Manager literature (Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968) describes the role of middle managers as central to an organization, quite literally because of their positioning within an organization, between senior leadership and frontline employees. Relatedly, middle managers are deemed essential in organizations due to their responsibility to regulate operations within the organization, often taking the lead as a first responder to emergency issues and coordinating a response between senior leaders and frontline employees to support organizational viability. Literature consistently describes the cascade that occurs when senior leaders give directives that middle managers are responsible for translating into work actions for their frontline employees. In contrast, literature does not describe a dynamic through which frontline employees or middle managers communicate concerns or share feedback with senior leadership.

Consistent with literature (Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002; Pugh et al., 1968), this study found that there is a steady dissemination of communication to middle managers (and subsequently to frontline employees) from senior leadership. However, this study illuminated that there is not a similar process or feedback loop allowing middle managers to share feedback with senior leadership in the same way. This broken communication chain limits middle manager's ability to inform senior leaders about their observations and experiences in day-to-day operations - but especially as it relates to lessons learned in real time on job sites, their difficulties balancing their day-to-day responsibilities, and challenges they are having implementing workplace learning activities for their frontline employees.

Communication among and between each level within an organization is critical. Broken communication results in a multitude of organizational issues like inhibiting an organization's ability to respond to change, reducing an organization's effectiveness in response to emergent issues, and creating a gap in organizational knowledge for the leaders tasked with oversight of the organization. Organizations can improve performance with the utilization of effective feedback loops (Newman, 2016). Study participants reported instances of being left out of decision making conversations but being expected to take ownership for implementing a new process or policy that they knew would be detrimental to their team's productivity or workflow. In these situations, study participants consult with other peer leaders to collaborate on interim solutions to respond to the change in policy or procedure, but they do not express their concerns to senior leaders. Study participants also described having to manage the feedback from frontline employees, but still having to move forward to enforce the changes despite their

own personal concerns and not having a way to voice those concerns. In these instances, study participants expressed confidence in knowing that if their professional perspective had been considered, senior leaders could have been better informed to make the best decision - for the organization and its employees.

The breakdown in communication identified through this study also impacts study participants' ability to effectively implement workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Study participants reported the absence of a process to inquire about workplace learning resources, request participation in workplace learning activities, or advocate for workplace learning resources for their team as a significant challenge. Study participants described doing their best to advocate for frontline employees that express interest in pursuing professional development opportunities internal or external to the university by making a direct request to senior leadership or by directing frontline employees to opportunities that are accessible to them, even in the absence of a formal process to make these requests. If frontline employees perceive that a process is too cumbersome or that there are no clear criteria for who has access to workplace learning activities, they may avoid making a request to participate in workplace learning activities (Kunce et al., 2001). That said, interventions by study participants are critical in some cases given the absence in a clear process for frontline employees to make this request on their own.

Several study participants also described a lack of transparency about the available budget for workplace learning activities and acknowledged the inability to weigh in on decisions related to funding for workplace learning activities as a significant barrier to mobilizing any plans they may have for their teams. In these cases where the

budget is unclear, study participants described an inability to really take action to implement workplace learning activities, without fear of the repercussions of overspending money that was not allocated for workplace learning. Withholding information from middle managers and not creating a means through which middle managers can provide input is crippling and causes middle managers to harbor feelings of discontent, uncertainty, and even fear of retaliation for advocating for themselves and their teams.

Frontline employees and middle managers must have an opportunity to provide feedback regularly to different levels of the organization so that everyone can be informed about the daily occurrences in university operations, where the problems exist, and how they are going to be addressed. Study participants frequently engage with peer managers to plan and organize resources to respond to the needs of the organization and their teams. Study participants also regularly spoke about having an “open door” policy for their teams to provide feedback at the middle manager level, but they did not state that senior leaders had a similar practice for inviting feedback from middle managers. Senior leaders need to create space for the subordinate employees to be able to provide feedback on organizational policies, practices, and to be able to advocate for their workplace learning needs. Addressing the disconnect in communication can have positive impacts on middle manager and frontline employee perception of senior leadership, organizational performance, and the overall employee experience.

In summary, The findings magnified the severity of the breakdown in communication attributed to middle managers and frontline employees' inability to provide feedback to senior leaders about the impact of decisions made at the

organizational and senior leadership level and their overall employee experience. As the first line of defense, frontline employees and middle managers are generally the first to be aware of a failure of an organizational process or an issue that has negative implications for business operations. Organizations and their senior leaders must create an upwards flow of communication from frontline employees and middle managers to improve organizational efficacy and the overall culture of the organization.

Finding 3: Middle Managers Play an Essential Role in Individual and Team Development

Empirical literature affirmed that middle managers are the cogs or the lynchpins (Harding et al., 2014), the essential piece that keeps organizations operating and moving forward. Through the accounts of study participants, a deeper and richer representation of middle manager day-to-day experiences was made available. Studies conducted on middle managers in the past, refer to middle managers as a function of the organization and do not report the human element of care and compassion that middle managers bring to their work daily, as they juxtapose the work of middle managers to the organization. This study surfaced a wealth of experience, care, and commitment that exuded from study participants that is not commonly elevated in middle manager literature. As this study sought to understand the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, it is important to also highlight middle managers perspective of themselves and their investment in the personal and professional development of their team.

Middle managers must be skilled at navigating organizational complexities and interpersonal dynamics at all levels within an organization. Harding et al. (2014) described middle managers as critical mediators for their skillful management of their

role. Despite often not being included in decision making processes at the organizational level, middle managers push through their own personal position on any given matter, to ensure their teams are informed and positioned for peak performance. This is no small feat. In many cases, leading multiple teams with varying technical responsibilities and across three shifts, middle managers streamline processes and find ways to cascade information directly to employees to support their success.

This study affirmed that middle managers are best positioned to lead their teams because they have identified the need for cultivating a sense of belonging among their team. Study participants described their intentional efforts to create opportunities for team discussions that were not related to work, to develop team culture and morale. It would be impossible to manage high-volume performance teams without being able to effectively motivate and coach staff according to their individual personality, strengths, and weaknesses. Middle managers are not merely cogs in an organization, they are the drivers of team culture and have a significant influence on organizational performance.

All study participants spoke in a profound way about the level of awareness they have of their employee's individual needs and challenges - often customizing 1-1 on-the-job training to address an individual's learning needs. This awareness is critical and should be utilized as organizations craft their strategic plan for workplace learning. Middle managers are essential to organizations, not just for translating operating directives into tangible work actions. They are essential to organizations for the value they bring by managing the beautiful, rich, diverse needs each employee brings when they arrive at work each day. Without middle managers, organizations would fail.

In summary, the findings of this study contribute to the body of empirical literature seeking to understand and define the identity, role, and work of middle managers in various industries worldwide. The analysis of the data collected for this study highlights the important work middle managers do to advance organizations by interpreting organizational directives into workplace actions for frontline employees. Their intermediary role in the organization requires middle managers to be skilled at navigating organizational complexities and interpersonal dynamics with senior leaders of the organization, where they often have very little influence over the establishment of policies and procedures that impact the employees that report up to them. Similarly, middle managers must be skilled at understanding the organizational landscape to be able to translate directives into tangible work outcomes. The work of middle managers is extremely demanding, but more importantly, it is essential to the business continuity of organizations.

Finding 4: Middle Managers Are In Need Of An Individual Development Plan

Historically, scholars in varying disciplines have linked the organization's financial investment in employee development to improved employee and organizational performance (Strober, 1990; Tan, 2014; Torraco & Swanson, 1995). Further, Wright et al., (1994) emphasized the importance of organizations investing in the development of all human capital within an organization, not exclusively providing development opportunities to higher skilled employees. Previous studies have identified that the needs of frontline employees are often neglected as organizations set their workplace learning plan for employees (Au et at., 2008, Burdett & Smith, 2002; Kyndt et al., 2013). There

have been fewer studies conducted to understand how middle manager development is prioritized as organizations set a workplace learning plan for their employees.

The literature review conducted for this study found that there were no previous studies that specifically explored this issue for middle managers in higher education operations. This study found that middle managers cannot appropriately plan workplace learning for frontline employees because middle managers do not have the technical or academic background to do so. In the same manner that this study has identified the need for organizations to provide adequate workplace learning activities for frontline employees, this study also identified that there is a need for organizations to strategically plan workplace learning activities to support the development of middle managers.

The middle manager role within organizations is unique in the sense that middle managers are expected to be responsible for an expansive scope of work; sometimes overseeing multiple organizational functions with limited knowledge of that particular scope of work. All of the participants of this study reported having been promoted to their current role as a middle manager from a direct service delivery role, often through several promotions to different sub-manager roles over time. Study participants described their experiences having to learn their new responsibilities on-the-job without any formal training available to guide their development on the specific duties of their new role. A promotion to middle manager from the frontline employee level is an opportunity for the middle manager to develop their leadership skills and expand their career portfolio, but this opportunity does not always require that the middle managers have reached a certain level of education or have mastered a particular skill set before taking on the role.

As described in the literature review for this study, frontline employees often have limited post-secondary education before entering the workforce (Kyndt et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2016; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017). Noted earlier in this chapter, this study identified that access to workplace learning is limited for frontline employees. The lack of access to workplace learning becomes a cycle that is perpetuated for middle managers as they rise among the organizational ranks from frontline employees to middle managers. The continual absence of workplace learning activities for middle managers creates two issues. First, underdeveloped middle managers do not have the skills that they need to be able to perform their jobs with a high degree of competency in all of the areas they might oversee. Second, underdeveloped middle managers do not have the technical or academic skills necessary to plan workplace learning activities for their frontline employees.

The gap in middle manager development creates a disconnect between middle managers and frontline employees when middle managers attempt to guide their teams toward meeting performance expectations. Middle managers are expected to cascade, enforce, and train their teams on the various work processes and policies of the organization, sometimes without having the proper training to enforce or train others on these same processes. As an example of this phenomenon, the site observations and document review elevated the disconnect that occurs when middle managers do not receive training on the university's SOP documents - as part of their new employee orientation or at any point throughout their tenure. The failure of organizations to provide critical training on policies that managers and employees are expected to comply with, is just one example of the many ways that middle managers are thrust into situations and

expected to know what to do, without any formal training process or long-term training plan. This failure in process prevents middle managers from being able to lead their teams as the written and unwritten responsibilities of their role would expect.

Similarly, study participants reported not having the technical competencies to develop workplace learning activities for frontline employees due to never receiving formal training on developing workplace learning curriculum for frontline employees. Organizations have a responsibility to provide middle managers with the skills required to develop effective workplace learning activities that help their employees to close skill gaps, strengthen existing skills, and learn new skills to aid them in productivity and performance (AL-Rawahi, 2022). The literature review for this study demonstrated that frontline employees have unique learning needs that require an intentional design for workplace learning activities (Kyndt et al., 2013). Study participants reported not feeling confident developing or leading structured workplace learning activities and instead, relying on limited external resources to help fill the void in their professional ability to plan and implement workplace learning activities for frontline employees. The deficit created when middle managers are unable to adequately develop workplace learning activities, slows middle manager's reaction time in providing workplace learning activities in response to emergent needs among the workforce, while concurrently stifling their growth in their role as middle managers. Middle managers must be equipped to be able to assess their employee's learning deficiencies, to respond to their learning needs. Having the ability to develop a workplace learning plan that can identify employee skill gaps and set forth a plan to fill those gaps with workplace learning activities that provide additional skills, is an essential skill for middle managers to have.

Finally, this study illuminated how the constant juggling of day-to-day responsibilities compresses middle managers' time and capacity to plan for their individual development and to plan workplace learning activities for their frontline employees. In cases where middle managers are overseeing teams of hundreds of people, it is necessary that middle managers have access to junior staff or sub-managers that can help them oversee day-to-day operations, disseminate information, and implement workplace learning activities in a way that is more proportionate than just one leader trying to be all things to all people. Study participants reported the lack of tangible workplace learning resources (e.g., physical materials or available budget), the variability of their schedule caused by a requirement to constantly respond to customers needs, the never-ending administrative load, the necessity to utilize multiple forms of communication to provide timely updates to multiple functions within the organization, and the absence of strategic planning time as just a few from a long list of factors that contribute to this problem of middle managers and their frontline teams not having the necessary workplace learning activities. These factors prevent middle managers from being able to prepare for, plan, and execute workplace learning activities that aid in their personal professional development and also in the development of their employees. Middle managers need to be empowered and supported by their employer to be able to utilize their expertise to support the needs of their teams.

In summary, middle managers are the first leaders within an organization to identify an operational problem and they are also often first to lead the response to the problem. They can identify if an issue is system related or if the issue is human capital related. Although their need may not be as dire as frontline employees, their ability to

evolve with the organization and to continue to perform is directly related to their access to available workplace learning resources. This study has more than demonstrated how essential middle managers are to their organizations and also how they are desperately in need of workplace learning resources for themselves and for their teams. Middle managers may have more propensity to independently pursue structured workplace learning opportunities, like utilizing their university's tuition benefit programs or pursuing a technical trade course. However, despite their drive to excel, middle managers, like all other employees, require the support of their organization to create an organizational culture and provide access to resources that cultivates middle manager development. To that end, it is essential that organizations prioritize the strategic investment in middle manager development. As organizations consider rightsizing their prioritization of workplace learning, organizations should also be intentional to develop a roadmap for middle manager development that expands their knowledge base to be able to adequately lead their frontline teams.

In conclusion, this study elevates our understanding of the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. Building on the findings of this study, organizations can better assess the prioritization of workplace learning for frontline employees, while equipping their middle managers to develop and deploy workplace learning solutions for frontline employees. This basic qualitative study identified four findings that provide a richness to our understanding of middle managers experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. From a recognition of the role organizational context has on middle manager's ability to effectively plan workplace learning activities for frontline employees to the level of

financial investment organizations are willing to make to ensure their middle managers can consistently improve their professional skills, this study has illuminated key findings that if addressed can directly transform individual employee performance and organizational performance. Middle managers are keenly aware that there are life and safety consequences associated with their day-to-day work. Providing middle managers with resources, efficient processes, and leadership support will aid them in developing a workforce that is agile and much improved.

Limitations

Qualitative research is designed to bring a richness to the representation and investigation of a problem that other research methodologies may limit. Every study will have some areas that could have been improved upon. This study called for the collection of data through semi-structured interviews, on-site observations, and a review of organizational documents related to workplace learning. To improve this study in the future, the following limitations should be considered: use of in-person interviews, inclusion of a focus group interview at each site, and the impact of researcher bias on the study.

This study was designed to allow participants to engage in the interview process in a virtual or in-person format. Although both forms of the interview yielded powerful participant data, the in-person interviews were much more poignant and added a layer of context to the data collection process that was not present in the virtual interviews. The in-person interviews allowed me to observe first-hand, study participant's body language and natural responses to the interview questions. The in-person interviews had more of a personal feel to them which allowed the study participants to settle into the space

designated for the interviews and I believe to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. Additionally, the in-person interviews allowed me to informally observe organizational culture in real time and how the study participants interacted with the organizational culture. These informal observations contributed to the data collection and analysis process in ways that are not possible in a virtual interview or phone call interview.

This study called for participants to meet four criteria. Study participants were middle managers, currently working at an institution of higher education, in the Washington DC regional area, and supervising frontline employees. The study design did not call for or anticipate that there would be multiple participants from the same university. If my committee and I had anticipated that there would have been multiple participants from the same university, we could have planned a focus group interview into the study design. Creswell (2013) noted that focus group interviews are ideal for a group of participants that have similar experiences. Focus groups are also most meaningful when a group of participants shared interactions can provide useful data to inform the interview questions. Not having a focus group forced me to make generalizations during data analysis that could not be confirmed from university to university. A focus group interview would have allowed for shared experiences to be validated, more transparency in the analysis of differing experiences, and also would have allowed for a university to university level of comparative analysis to be included in the findings.

Qualitative research is dependent on the researcher's interpretation of the data collected to support the study (Creswell, 2013). My interests and passion for this study's

problem of practice required me to constantly be mindful of my role as a researcher, to handle the data and the outcomes of this study with integrity. Throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting phases of this study, I was consistently engaged with my dissertation committee, classmates, and colleagues employed in this field to keep my work objective. As noted in Chapter 3, I was diligent to take notes in my journal and in my interview notes during and after each interview. I captured my reactions to on-site observations and organizational documents on the respective checklists and in my journal. Being able to refer back to my notes allowed me to separate my personal perspectives from the accounts of study participants and to level-set my work as I progressed through data analysis and reporting.

Despite the limitations identified here, the legitimacy and relevance of this study is very powerful without building in the elements of in-person interviews or a focus-group interview at each site. Future research should consider these limitations to determine if making one or both of the modifications identified here will improve upon our understanding of middle managers' experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees.

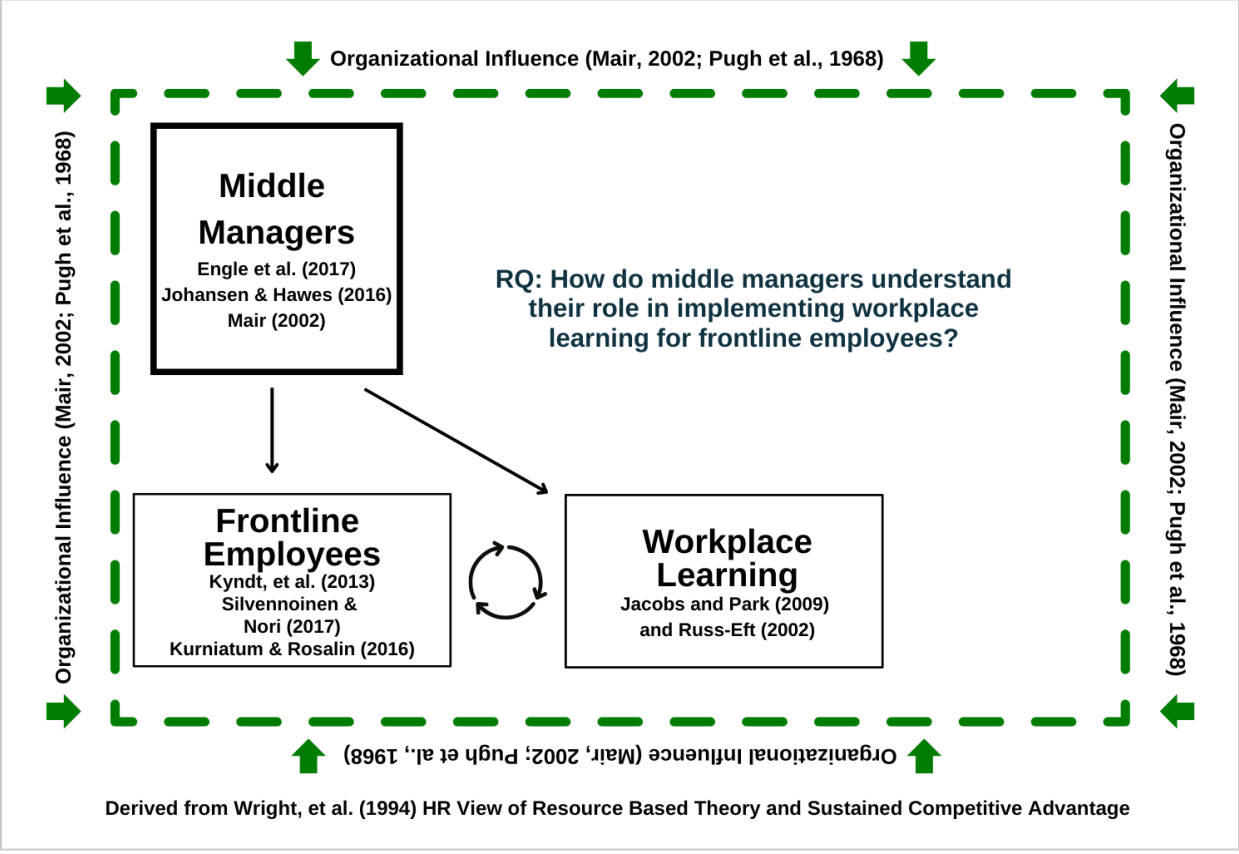
Contributions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, to broaden our understanding of the role middle managers play in organizations and to connect to middle manager’s challenges and victories in their efforts to develop their teams. In doing so, this study surfaced insights about organizational culture, organizational communication, the unique workplace learning needs of employees within the organization, and the role middle

managers play in reconciling these dynamics. From these lessons the following section will highlight theoretical contributions, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research. The recommendations in this section follow the flow of the conceptual framework (Figure 5) for this study and incorporate recommendations for the organizational and senior leadership and middle manager level related to the implementation of workplace learning activities for frontline employees. I expect that these insights will aid organizational leaders and middle managers in their work to improve the working experiences of middle managers as they work to improve workplace learning programs for frontline employees.

Figure 5

Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Contributions

This study makes two contributions to middle manager and human capital theory literature. First, in an effort to understand middle manager's role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees, this study also expands our understanding of middle manager experiences in the workplace. Second, this study expands the application of Human Capital Theory to consider the social conditions of frontline employees and the feasibility for them to pursue development opportunities on their own outside of any available workplace learning activities on their job. This section details these two contributions to our scholarly understanding.

Historically, empirical studies of middle managers (Engle et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2014; Johansen & Hawes, 2016; Mair, 2002) have focused largely on the roles middle managers play as the lynchpin in organizations to receive and interpret direction from senior leaders and to translate that into work responsibilities for frontline employees. Harding et al., (2014) found that middle manager identities "emerge from their being subjects and objects of control and subjects of resistance" (Harding et al., 2014, p. 1214). Additionally, Harding et al., (2014) claimed that middle managers are often in positions that comprise their sense of personal security, cause them to abandon ethical principles, and display heightened anxiety and insecurity. Contrary to Harding et al., (2014) this study found that middle managers have a very clear sense of personal identity that is grounded in so much more than who they are to their organization. Middle managers are also intentional about celebrating the diversity of humanity among their frontline team members. Further, this study confirmed that middle managers are conditioned to respond

calmly to operational emergencies, always thinking of innovative ways to work within the constraints of the organizational system to achieve the expected results.

Foundational middle manager literature highlights the role of middle managers managing human resources, including the planning and facilitation of activities that support employee development (Johansen & Hawes, 2016). Although foundational literature names this responsibility for middle managers, absent in the literature are details related to how middle managers implement workplace learning activities for frontline employees and also absent from the literature are strategies to support middle managers in the implementation of workplace learning for frontline employees. This study found that middle managers are largely engaged in unstructured workplace learning activities (Jacobs and Park, 2009), including on-the-job training and coaching due to the demands of their role. Their time for planning and implementing structured workplace learning activities is significantly restricted, limiting their ability to support the development of job specific skills for their employees. Middle managers called attention to their lack of technical training to develop workplace learning activities for their employees. Surfacing the reality that middle managers are in need of development, to be able to meet the developmental needs of their employees is a significant contribution in framing the experiences of middle manager experiences implementing workplace learning for their frontline teams. This study advanced our understanding of the relationship between human capital theory and middle managers' experiences implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees.

Human capital theory was utilized to underpin the conceptual framework for this study (Becker, 1962). Similar to the way that the majority of workplace learning

programs are designed nationwide to focus on the needs of high skilled employees and also to ensure organizational compliance (ATD, 2022), human capital theory was written with the assumption that individuals have the financial capital to be able to invest in their own professional development. Even in recently expanded views of human capital theory, the social conditions of frontline employees are not considered in the application of this theory. Through the accounts of middle managers, this study confirmed that the social conditions of frontline employees (e.g., low-wages, needing to work a second job, limited transportation, etc.) prevent frontline employees from being able to pursue professional development opportunities on their own and that frontline employees are therefore dependent on workplace learning provided by the organization for professional development.

Modern application of human capital theory (Au et al., 2008; Leoni, 2025) and the HR View of Resource Based Theory (Wright et al., 1994) suggests that the financial investment in workplace learning activities is the responsibility of the organization and this investment should result in increased individual performance, which in turn positively impacts individual wages and organizational performance. This study found that the allocation of resources by the universities featured in this study, for workplace learning, was not adequate and that the middle managers who are responsible for ensuring the development of their frontline employees were not resourced to be able to plan and implement workplace learning activities. This study affirmed how important workplace learning activities are for the ongoing development of frontline employees and how important it is for scholars to consider all levels of employees within an organization when applying human capital theory. When the organization and middle managers cannot

provide adequate workplace learning activities to meet the varying needs of frontline employees, this employee group fails to have access to professional development opportunities and eventually stagnates (Nafukho et al., 2004). Not addressing the workplace learning needs of frontline employees does not only impact these employees, ultimately a team with inadequate job skills will have negative effects on the organization's ability to meet their goals.

This study sought to understand middle managers' experiences implementing workplace learning for frontline employees and indirectly learn more about the organization's role in providing workplace learning. Expanding the use of human capital theory to account for the organization's role in providing adequate workplace learning activities for all employees is essential. Scholars must continue to advocate for the increase in resources to be able to do so. This study supported the perspective that middle managers serve a key role in organizations. This study also explored the nuanced responsibility middle managers in higher education operations have to plan for, develop, and facilitate workplace learning activities for their frontline teams. These contributions demonstrate the need for future studies to explore the unique conditions and experiences of middle managers working to align their frontline employees to organizational goals through workplace learning activities.

Recommendations for Practice

This study sought to understand the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. This study identified that middle managers' experiences are significantly shaped by organizational processes and senior leadership decisions. Three recommendations have been identified to aid senior

leaders in prioritizing and properly resourcing workplace learning within the organization, creating an upwards flow of communication from the frontline and middle manager level, and implementing a development plan for middle managers to provide them with the tools they need to effectively design workplace learning activities.

Strategic Planning for Workplace Learning Activities

This study found that senior leaders are not actively engaged in the strategic planning of workplace learning activities for middle managers or frontline employees. Senior leadership teams establish annual performance goals for the organization that cascade down to middle managers and frontline employees to execute. However, as was demonstrated at the four universities in this study, there is no specific training or roadmap provided to these employees to help them work towards and achieve these goals. Along with the establishment of annual goals, senior leaders should lead (or be included at the very least) in a strategy discussion with middle managers to think through what workplace learning activities align with the annual goals, to best aid in reaching those goals. This strategy discussion should be held in advance of the establishment and distribution of annual performance goals for the organization.

Similarly, the findings of this study demonstrated that middle managers are often overburdened with administrative responsibilities and the constant need to respond to issues at the job sites, significantly limiting their time to sufficiently assess the workplace learning needs of their employees, plan for workplace learning activities, and implement these activities. As senior leadership heeds the previous recommendation to plan strategically for workplace learning organization-wide, senior leaders need to create an organizational culture that empowers middle managers to build in working boundaries to

protect their time to plan for workplace learning (Khan et al., 2021; Kotter, 2008). Creating an environment where middle managers feel empowered to delegate tasks to sub-managers or team leads will free up the time needed to conduct research and to design workplace learning activities that align with the organizational goals and drive employee performance. Senior leaders could also schedule time during the organizational strategy session for middle managers to plan for their workplace learning activities six months or one year at a time. Having plans outlined in advance would allow middle managers to maintain their high demands of their day-to-day workload, but also allow adequate time for them to support workplace learning for frontline employees.

Alignment of Organizational Resources to Address the Needs of Staff

The findings of this study demonstrated that organizations need to improve the allocation of resources designated for the workplace learning program. By providing middle managers with clear expectations of available funding for workplace learning programs, developing a transparent and equitable process for managers and staff to request workplace learning, and by establishing an evaluation criteria to support middle managers and other key leaders in the disbursement of workplace learning resources.

This study confirmed that organizations are under-resourcing workplace learning in their annual budget. This does not necessarily mean that the organization does not have the resources to fund workplace learning, it simply means that funding for workplace learning is a smaller portion of the budget in comparison to other organizational priorities. In 2023, the Association for Talent Development reported in their State of the Industry Report that on average $1,220 per employee was budgeted for annual employee development (ATD, 2023). Training and development resources, internal and external to

the organization, can be expensive and require strategic planning by senior leaders and middle managers. Assessing the workplace learning needs of the employees and aligning the budget to the needs of the employees will allow for the optimization of financial and human resources. 15 of 17 participants in the study reported that they do not directly manage the workplace learning budget, which creates issues for middle managers trying to plan workplace learning for their teams. Organizations need to clearly earmark operational funding for workplace learning and communicate the availability of funding to middle managers so that they can plan workplace learning activities for their teams.

Along the same lines, an equitable and transparent process needs to be developed for middle managers and frontline employees to request participation in workplace learning activities. Equity was defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) as addressing "systemic imbalances and ensuring fair access to resources and opportunities for all individuals" (NACE, 2025). Empirical literature confirms that organizations focus their workplace learning resources on professional staff and leaders within the organization (Wotschalk, 2020), as opposed to focusing these resources on the frontline employees that are most in need of these resources. Equity in workplace learning programs is essential. As research shows that the trend in financial resources allocated to workplace learning activities will never fully allow each staff person to access exactly the training that is needed (ATD, 2023), organizations can be more intentional about aligning resources to employees based on their need and not on their role or status within the organization.

This study found that frontline employees are increasingly disadvantaged in the workplace due to the conditions of their employment (low-wage, needing to work

additional jobs, and lack of personal resources to cover the cost of external training). Because there are no established processes for employees to request workplace learning, the skill gap for frontline employees widens as a result of limited access to workplace learning. An equitable process should promote available workplace learning opportunities to all employees through channels they are able to access (newsletters, posters, or meeting announcements). The process should outline clear instructions for employees to submit a request for workplace learning. The process should also include clear evaluation criteria for middle managers and senior leaders to confirm that the requested workplace learning activity aligns to fill the employee's skill gap (Russ-Eft, 2002).

Finally, Individual Development Plans (IDP) can be crafted by middle managers and their employees to map out workplace learning needs and desires from performance year to performance year. These plans can help middle managers and other senior leaders in the organization to forecast the financial resources along with the desired professional development goals of each employee. Utilizing an annual workplace learning plan will allow middle managers to consider structured and unstructured workplace learning activities that meet both the employee's goals for development and the organization's need for employee development. These plans also serve as a great supplemental tool in the assessment of annual performance and the plan for future performance. Individual Development Plans enable middle managers to take proactive and strategic action in planning for employee development.

Workplace Learning Accessibility

This study found that accessibility of workplace learning activities was regularly referenced as a barrier to workplace learning. For the purposes of this study, it is

important to note that accessibility refers to an employee's ability to access physical or virtual workplace learning resources and that they are able to learn from them without barriers. Literature notes that employees' personal context, the design of the workplace learning activity, the social context of the workplace learning activity, the use of technology, and facilitating a training in a different language can create barriers to workplace learning activities for frontline employees (Kunche et al., 2001, Kyndt et al., 2013). This study also confirmed that middle managers have a key role in ensuring workplace learning activities are accessible to frontline employees. Middle managers must have the training needed to be able to plan workplace learning activities to meet their employee's learning needs.

As mentioned in previous recommendations in this section, there needs to be alignment and shared understanding at the organizational, senior leadership, and middle manager level on the strategic direction and processes for workplace learning. Additionally, financial and physical resources (e.g., training workbooks, worksheets, access to online training platforms, etc.) need to be allocated to support the workplace learning needs of employees within the organization. As this alignment comes together, it is imperative that middle managers are informed and mindful of other factors that frequently create barriers for workplace learning for frontline employees. Being able to assess employee skill levels and to accurately align those with the organizational goals is a necessary skill for middle managers to master.

An annual assessment of employee performance skills will help middle managers to plan for the workplace learning needs and also to plan for the best training methods (e.g., in-person, online, group, individual, etc.) that will support closing employee

learning gaps over time. An annual assessment of employee performance skills will also help middle managers to determine if the resources needed for workplace learning are available in-house or if external learning resources will need to be pursued. The employee performance skill assessment will also help middle managers to determine if structured workplace learning or unstructured workplace learning are the best vehicles to address the gaps within their team. Middle managers may need to partner with their peers in human resources learning and development or other external learning and development organizations to devise their strategic skill gap plan.

This study found that utilization of technology for workplace learning activities and for completion of day-to-day work tasks continues to be a barrier for frontline employees due to their lack of computer literacy and their limited engagement with technology during their work day. Organizations and senior leaders should consider implementing a basic computer training class, that is mandatory for frontline employees to attend, to support the development of their competency and confidence in the use of technological systems over time. In addition to incorporating a basic computer literacy class, middle managers should plan to improve employee competency on systems and tools that are customized for their work in operations. It is necessary for middle managers to be intentional about how they can plan these learning opportunities in a way that provides timely access, allowing employees to develop the skills before needing to use them in the workplace.

This study found that language was also identified as a consistent barrier for frontline middle managers communicating to frontline employees and for frontline employees engaging in workplace learning activities. This study found that workplace

learning activities are frequently not accessible to non-English speakers because the training materials are not prepared in the primary languages of the frontline employees. Although middle managers make an attempt to provide materials with language translations, this study found that middle managers are often managing a team of employees with primary languages that are non-English. Middle managers described the difficulty in trying to ensure that all workplace learning materials are available in the primary languages of each member of their teams and the challenges that they face trying to uphold that commitment with such demanding day-to-day priorities. In this case it is important for middle managers to first be able to identify what languages are spoken among their team and then to partner with others within the organization who might be able to support the translation of materials into the primary language of the employees. Middle managers should not be left to manage this alone. Having support for the development of the resources at the organizational level, will allow for translation services to be provided to all middle managers of an organization in a streamlined and efficient manner.

Additionally, the study identified that even when materials are translated into the primary language of the employees, there are some employees who are not literate in English or in their primary language. In this case, middle managers must take these skill deficiencies into consideration when planning workplace learning activities, to allow for the presence of a peer translator to support the needs of those employees. Middle managers can also work one-on-one with employees on a job site to demonstrate the deficient skill to the employee and to allow the employee to practice the skill alongside the manager until the skill is mastered. Incorporating a translator or working one-on-one

with employees on a job site can provide access to workplace learning that may be limited through printed materials or a presentation, increasing understanding and skill adoption for these employees.

The study found that time is a huge barrier for workplace learning engagement for frontline employees. Frontline employees are often held to a schedule that allows them to complete a certain amount of work within a given work shift. In this case stepping away from their work to participate in workplace learning activities can be detrimental to their productivity for a day. It is essential that middle managers are aware of the pressure that navigating the decision between task completion and participation in workplace learning creates for frontline employees. Middle managers can support engagement in workplace learning activities by providing frontline employees with opportunities to step away from their day-to-day work to participate in workplace learning activities.

Finally, the study also identified that frontline employees are more often working second jobs to earn a living wage and that their ability to independently participate in learning activities outside of work is significantly limited. In these cases and as a part of their broader strategic plan for workplace learning, middle managers and senior leaders should consider allowing frontline employees time away from work to be able to attend an external learning opportunity or training that will give them the skills that they need to be able to accurately complete their job and work towards promotional opportunities. Tying this to recommendations made earlier in this section, middle managers should be able to determine through their workplace learning criteria if the return on the investment in external workplace learning activities is greater than having the employee at work

while they are completing the external workplace learning engagement and if their future skill improvement will be more beneficial to the organization.

As senior leaders and middle managers review these recommendations for practice, it is essential that they understand that these recommendations work together and that not one recommendation stands alone. The recommendations in this section follow the flow of the conceptual framework for this study and incorporate recommendations for the organizational and senior leadership and middle manager level related to the implementation of workplace learning activities for frontline employees. Senior leaders and middle managers can certainly take one recommendation and apply it to their organization as necessary, but it is most beneficial for organizations to take a systems thinking approach (Reed, 2006) to these recommendations to reflect on the needs of the organization from the system perspective before narrowing into a specific problem or component that requires improvement.

The recommendations identified in this section take into consideration the muti-faceted challenges that organizations have in allocating resources throughout the organization to ensure business continuity, but more specifically these recommendations consider the challenges organizations face in allocating resources for workplace learning. Further, these recommendations consider the impacts to middle managers who do not control resource allocation and do not have the available time or job skills to adequately plan workplace learning activities for their frontline employees. Senior leaders and middle managers should be mindful of the top-down processes, procedures, and budget implications for workplace learning. Every organization is different and has different

challenges, but considering these recommendations will aid middle managers in their role to implement workplace learning for frontline employees.

Implications for Future Research

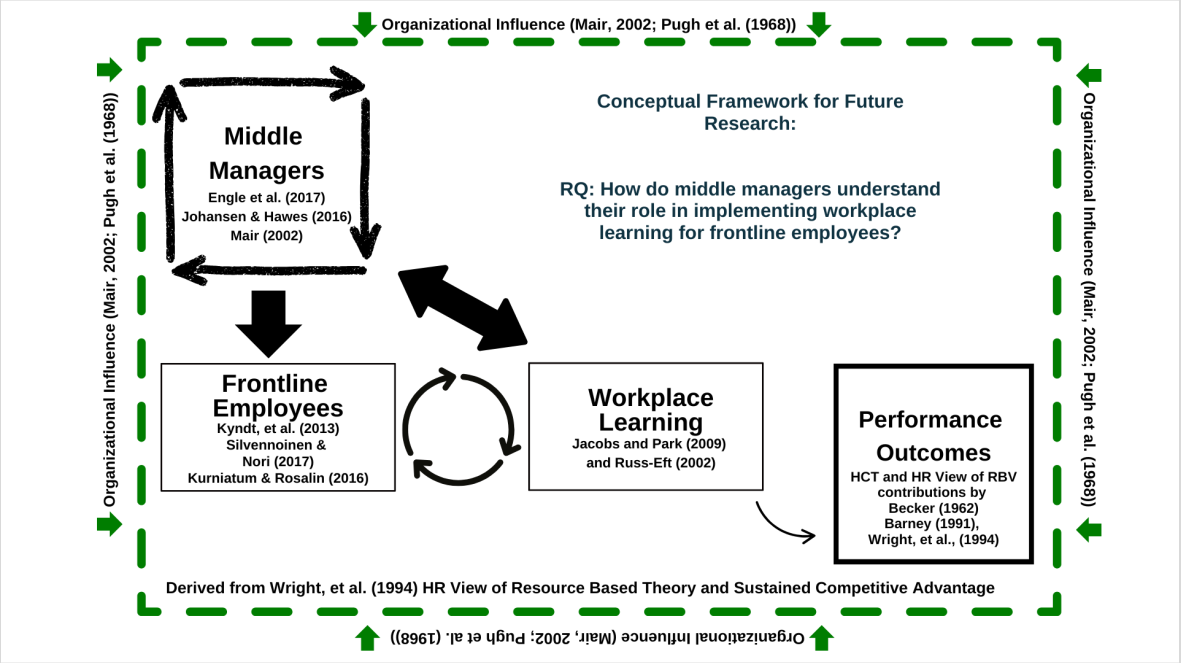
This study focused on middle managers' role in implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. To further expand our knowledge, a research study could be conducted to better understand the experiences of frontline employees engaging with workplace learning activities implemented by middle managers. The literature review for this study found that there are studies that generalize the experience of frontline employees for the purposes of understanding how wage and social status impact their role as employees and also their ability to engage effectively in workplace learning (Kyndt et al., 2013; Maxwell, 2006). Literature that focuses on the effectiveness of workplace learning (Kirkpatrick, 1959, 1975; Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010) exists in general, but it does not expound upon the experiences of frontline employees in the assessment of effectiveness of workplace learning. To expand upon our knowledge in empirical studies it would be beneficial to directly explore frontline employee's awareness of workplace learning activities, how they perceive communication related to workplace learning activities, and their ability to apply what they have learned through workplace learning activities to their day-to-day work. In essence, this study would assess the effectiveness of workplace learning activities from the vantage point of frontline employees.

Through the use of Human capital theory (Barney, 1991; Becker, 1962) and the HR View of Resource Based Theory (Wright et al., 1994) to underpin this study, the assessment of employee performance in relationship to the effectiveness of workplace learning was implicit in the study design and outcomes. Although this study did not

explore the direct impact of workplace learning on employee performance, the conceptual framework utilized for this study can be expanded to include an assessment of performance outcomes. Figure 6 includes performance outcomes as a final step in the relationship between middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees. A study that considers the inputs of a workplace learning activity and measures the expected outcomes of that activity against the actual performance outcomes would help researchers and practitioners to better plan workplace learning activities for frontline employees that yield the desired employee and organizational performance outcomes. Figure 6 includes additional multi-directional arrows that represent the findings of this study. Four arrows surround middle managers to demonstrate the influence they have across organizational boundaries. Additionally, a two-way arrow has been added to demonstrate the role middle managers have to develop workplace learning activities for their employees and also middle managers' need for professional development through workplace learning.

Figure 6

Expanded Conceptual Framework for Future Research



Data collection for this study included on-site observations, which served as a catalyst for theme generation and concluding the findings. The on-site observations provided depth to the study participants perspectives that would not have been captured without the observations. A future study to understand frontline employee's experiences engaging with workplace learning activities or to assess the impact of workplace learning on employee performance should include an on-site observation to allow future researchers the same benefit of being fully immersed in the research environment. On-site observations will also create space for future researchers to be able to incorporate their own experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2022) along with the data that is captured through the data collection process.

Finally, this study was restricted to middle managers implementing workplace learning for frontline employees in higher education institutions in the Washington DC

regional area. This study focused on understanding this problem with this specific regional context due to the concentration of universities and university entities in the Washington DC regional area and their impact on the region's employment and economy. While this study provided great insights to the experiences of middle managers on four campuses in the Washington DC regional area, it would expand our knowledge to explore the experiences of middle managers in a broader geographic context. Expanding the study nationally or even globally could offer significant insights related to the findings of this study and the presence of similar or more critical issues in other universities around the world.

Conclusions

This basic interpretive qualitative study explored the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning programming for frontline employees in higher education institutions in the Washington DC regional area. The experiences of 17 middle managers at four universities, site observations at three universities, and a review of institutional documents related to workplace learning from three universities provided the outcomes for this study and the basis for guidance for future research. This study provided valuable insights into how middle managers understand their role navigating organizational dynamics and then translating organizational directives into performance tasks for their employees, as a means of achieving organizational goals. Beyond the description of the role of middle managers in empirical literature, this study elevated the daily efforts of middle managers to optimize university operations. This study also illuminated the efforts middle managers make to support a team culture that is inclusive and accounts for each employees' individual development needs.

By exploring the experiences of middle managers in higher education operations implementing workplace learning activities for their employees, this research study sheds light on the challenges middle managers have in overcoming systemic breakdowns in organizational communication and processes, the need for ongoing development and access to workplace learning for middle managers and their teams, and the significant role middle managers play in their organization and as the leader of their team. Despite all of the odds stacked against them, middle managers rise to the occasion as essential leaders within the organizational construct. It is imperative that organizations and the senior leaders that oversee organizations consider the findings of this study as an opportunity to improve the experiences of middle managers and frontline employees as it pertains to the implementation of workplace learning.

Study participants were enthusiastic to lend their experiences to this study and to have a space created for their voices to be heard. As a researcher, it was such a privilege to learn from the brilliant and thoughtful middle managers that work behind the scenes to ensure that teachers can teach and students can learn. In conclusion, this study significantly contributes to an evolving theoretical, empirical, and practical discussion related to middle managers in organizations and in the implementation of workplace learning. The findings from this study illuminate the critical role middle managers play in driving organizational strategy and supporting the development of their employees through the implementation of structured and unstructured workplace learning activities.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

Date: September 11, 2024
To: Egan, Toby
From: The George Washington University Committee on Human Research, Institutional Review Board (IRB), FWA00005945
Subject: **IRB# NCR235466** , "*Bridging the Gap for the Greater Good: Examining Middle Manager Experiences Implementing Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees* "

Exempt Determination Date: 09/11/2024

The request for an exemption determination for the above-referenced study has been completed. The study was determined to be research that is **exempt** from IRB review under DHHS regulatory **category 2**. The project as described in the application may proceed without further oversight by the OHR.

The exemption determination applies only to the project described in your IRB Application. Any changes that may alter in any way the risks to participants, type of information to be accessed, addition of new populations, or change in PI may not be instituted without submission of a Modification within the iRIS system and further review by the OHR prior to implementation of the changes. Please note, it is the responsibility of the GW research team to ensure all approved research personnel have up-to-date CITI training at all times in order to conduct human subjects/participants research.

Questions or concerns regarding the exemption determination made for the study should be directed to the GW Office of Human Research at ohrirb@gwu.edu or (202) 994-2715.

APPENDIX B: SITE AUTHORIZATION LETTER

Greetings To You:

My name is Ayana Thomas. I am a doctoral student researcher at the George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development. To complete my dissertation, I am conducting research on the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area.

I am reaching out to you to request authorization to conduct a 60-minute interview with individuals on your team who may meet the study criteria (see below). The perspective of members of your team are extremely significant to me and I commit to maintaining the confidentiality of your organization and your employees. Additionally, I am committed to maintaining the integrity of any information shared with me during the interview.

Research Study Criteria:

- Middle Manager (Supervisor, Manager, or Director)
- Currently overseeing frontline employees
- Responsible for implementing workplace learning activities
- At a college or university in the Washington DC regional area

Three forms of data will be collected as a part of this study: one 60-minute interview, an observation of the space (break room or classroom) used for workplace learning, and a review of any available communication utilized in the last 30 days related to workplace learning.

Data Collection Methods:

- **Interview** - Study participants will meet with me for 60 minutes, during their business day to discuss their role as a middle manager in implementing workplace learning activities for their team. Study participants will not be compensated through this study for their participation. Interviews can be conducted in-person, on-site or by zoom.
- **Site Visit** - Study participants will provide access to visit or view the location where workplace learning generally takes place for your employees. This portion of the research process will take no more than 15 minutes. If the interview is conducted by zoom, study participants will be asked to provide a photo of this space(s), when it is not in use.
- **Document Review** - Study participants can submit any recent communications to employees with details about a past or upcoming training. This portion of the research process will be conducted before the interview to better inform the discussion.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Any employees who opt-in to participate will receive an informed consent package which provides key details about the study and informs them that their employment status will not be affected in any way by participating in this process. Any information shared with me (including their names) will be kept confidential and participants can opt out at any point in the process. All interviews will be conducted during a fixed window of time agreed upon by you at a later date.

Please reply to this email to provide authorization for me to conduct on-site or virtual interviews with your team. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at ajtmoore@gwu.edu.

Many Thanks,
Ayana Thomas - Doctoral Candidate - The George Washington University

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Greetings To You:

My name is Ayana Thomas. I am a doctoral student researcher at the George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development. To complete my dissertation, I am conducting research on the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning activities for frontline employees at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area.

I am reaching out to you to participate in this research study and/or to share this invitation with your colleagues who may meet the study criteria.

Research Study Criteria:

- Middle Manager (Supervisor, Manager, or Director)
- Currently overseeing frontline employees
- Responsible for implementing workplace learning activities
- At a college or university in the Washington DC regional area

What Is Asked Of You:

- **Interview** - Participate in a 1-hour conversation with me to share more about your experiences as a middle manager.
- **Document Review** - An opportunity to review a recent communication to employees with details about a past or upcoming training.
- **Site Visit** - visit or view the location where training generally takes place for your employees.

Your perspective is extremely significant to me and I commit to maintaining your confidentiality and the integrity of any information shared with me during the interview. Your employment status will not be affected in any way should you choose to participate in this interview or should you choose to opt out at any point in the process.
If you are interested in participating, please schedule a meeting time with this link:

Once you have scheduled your meeting, I will share an informed consent package that provides additional information about the interview process. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at ajtmoore@gwu.edu.

Many Thanks,

Ayana Thomas
Doctoral Candidate
The George Washington University
Human and Organizational Learning

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT FLYER

Doctoral Study Participants Needed

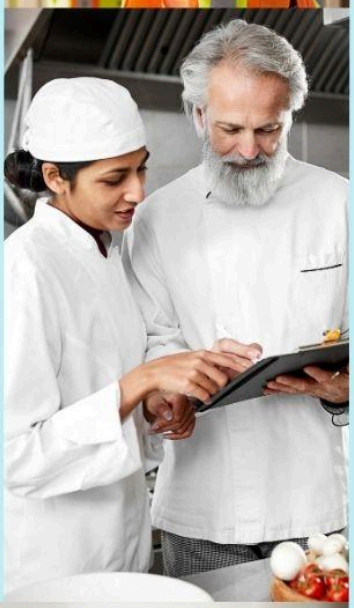
Study Title:
Bridging the Gap for the Greater Good: Examining Middle Manager Experiences Implementing Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees

Participant Eligibility:

- Working in the DMV Area at a 2 or 4 year College or University
- Supervisor, Manager, or Director
- Manages frontline employees
- Involved in training for team
- Willing to participate in a 1-hr virtual or in-person interview

If you or someone you know would like to participate in this study, please email ajtmoore@gwu.edu.

Ayana Thomas, Doctoral Candidate
The George Washington University



APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this research study with Ayana Thomas, Doctoral Candidate at The George Washington University. Please take a moment to complete this pre-interview questionnaire to allow the student researcher to gather preliminary data before your interview.

If you have any questions, please email the student researcher at ajtmoore@gwu.edu. Thank you for your time!

1. Participant Last Name/Participant Email
2. What is your job title?
3. Is your university a 2-year or 4-year institution of higher education?
4. Are your employees considered "essential workers"?
5. How many employees do you oversee?
6. Do you have support staff (supervisors, coordinators, etc.) that help you with managing your team?
7. Do all of your employees participate in training?
8. Do you manage an annual budget for workplace learning and training?

APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

Greetings To You:

My name is Ayana Thomas. I am a doctoral student researcher at the George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development. To complete my dissertation, I am conducting research on the workplace learning practices of middle managers at institutions of higher education in the Washington DC regional area. More specifically, I am interested in understanding how middle managers incorporate the unique needs of frontline employees into the design of workplace learning activities.

For this study, I will be interviewing middle managers who have the responsibility to create and implement workplace learning activities for their frontline employees. I will request an opportunity to review a recent communication to employees with details about a past or upcoming training. I would also like to visit or view the location where training generally takes place for your employees. The interview, communication, and site review will provide me with critical information that will help me to further research in the area of staff training and development, specifically for frontline employees. It is important to me that you know that participant identities and the identity of the organization that you are affiliated with will remain confidential in the report associated with this research study. Your employment status will not be affected in any way should you choose to participate in this interview or should you choose to opt out at any point in the process.

Information gathered during this interview will be video and audio recorded, analyzed, interpreted against other data collected through this process, and reported (in summary) at the conclusion of this research study. Your perspective is extremely significant to me and I commit to maintaining the integrity of any information shared with me during the interview.

Before you agree to participate it is important that you review and understand the information provided in the Research Participant Information Package (attached). I will review this letter with you prior to asking for your signature. I want to make sure any questions or concerns you may have are adequately addressed. My contact information is included in the information package should you have any questions. You may review and discuss information contained in this package with others as well if you'd like.

Many Thanks,
Ayana Thomas
Doctoral Candidate
The George Washington University
Human and Organizational Learning

Research Participant Information Package

Research Study Title: Bridging The Gap for the Greater Good: Examining Middle Managers Experiences Implementing Workplace Learning for Frontline Employees

Principal Investigator: Toby Egan, PhD., Associate Professor, Human and Organizational Learning at The Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University, tobyegan@gwu.edu

Study Purpose

The study will examine the experiences of middle managers implementing workplace learning. The study will call attention to and address the gap that exists in workplace learning and human capital theory literature related to addressing the workplace learning needs of frontline employees. The study will fortify the feedback loop required for ongoing engagement between the mid-manager teams and employee populations throughout the organization. Finally, the study will provide a roadmap for resourced and inclusive structured workplace learning practices within universities and other organizations. This study fulfills the degree requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at the George Washington University.

Study Participant Criteria

We invite you to take part in a research study because you meet the following requirements of the study:

- *Middle Manager*: "the direct supervisors of the workers in their unit and are responsible for hiring, evaluation, and improvement of those workers" (Johansen & Hawes, 2016, p. 593). "Staff with a supervisory capacity other than senior leaders (e.g., department managers, program managers, nurse managers, administrative directors, frontline supervisors)" (Engle et al., 2017).

- *Overseeing Frontline Employees*: In your role as manager, you have supervisory responsibility for members of a frontline team. Frontline employees are defined as employees of a higher education institution, working in a direct, service-delivery capacity (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016; Kyndt et al, 2013; Maxwell, 2016; Silvennoinen & Nori, 2017)

- *Implementing Workplace Learning*: In your role as manager, you have the responsibility of implementing workplace learning activities (e.g., training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity) for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet the current and future work requirements (Jacobs & Park, 2009)

- *Institution of Higher Education within the Washington DC Regional Area*: You are directly or indirectly employed by a 2-4 year, college or university located in Washington DC, Maryland or Virginia

Study Participation Information and Options

- Your identity and the identity of your employer will not be disclosed at any point in the research process or in subsequent publications resulting from the study. Everything that you share will be maintained in anonymity.
- At any point in time, you can opt in/out of participating in the study.
- It is your choice to participate. Whatever you decide will not be held against you.
- At any point in the process, you can ask questions to inform your decision regarding participation.

Research Team Contact Information

For any questions before or after the interview, please contact Ayana Thomas (ajtmoore@gwu.edu, 301-615-1466). For complaints or concerns about the study, contact Toby Egan (tobyegan@gwu.edu, 317-938-9111). This research is being overseen by the George Washington University Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). You can reach the GW IRB representatives at 202-994-2715 or via email at ohrirb@gwu.edu.

Are there any benefits for my participation?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research. Participation in this study will create a safe space for you to reflect critically about your experiences as a middle manager and also about your role in your team's professional development. Outcomes from this study will help organizations and leaders develop more intentional workplace learning practices to address the needs of frontline employees. This study will further scholarly theoretical views and practices related to middle managers, frontline employees, and workplace learning.

What do I have to do to participate in the study?

Study participants will engage in one, open dialogue interview with the researcher for 60-90 minutes by Zoom. Up to three weeks later, participants will be asked to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy and to provide confirmation to the researcher by email.

What happens if I agree to participate in this study?

If after reading this information sheet, you have decided to participate in this study, please follow the steps below:

1. Please schedule your interview using this link. You will receive a confirmation email and calendar invite. You will receive a system generated reminder the day before the interview. If you need to cancel or reschedule at any point, you can do so by emailing the researcher (ajtmoore@gwu.edu) or through the confirmation email.
2. You will be asked to sign the "Informed Consent" Form before the researcher begins the interview.

What happens to the information collected for the research?
To the extent allowed by law, access to any personal information disclosed in the course of the study will be limited to only the researcher and principal investigator. While we cannot guarantee complete secrecy, we do intend to capture your responses in a manner that protects your anonymity by using de-identified quotes. The IRB and other GSEHD representatives may inspect a copy of the interview transcripts, audio or video recordings.

What happens to the interview transcripts and recordings after the interview is completed? Participants will be audio-recorded during the interview process and the recordings will be transcribed for data analysis. The researcher will destroy audio recordings once the dissertation is complete but would like to keep transcriptions of the recordings for at least one year, but no more than three years after the dissertation is complete to contribute to future publications.

If I participate in this study, are there any potential bad outcomes for me?
Our goal with this study is to understand the experiences of middle managers and to utilize this process to better inform the work associated with workplace learning. There may be some uncomfortable moments as you think through your responses to the interview questions, but the researcher has all good intentions. All you are providing is perspective. There are no physical or other requirements that would bring you harm.

What other choices do I have besides taking part in the research?
The choice will remain yours. You can decide not to participate in this study at any time. There is no pressure.

Thank you for reviewing this information sheet and for considering participation in this research study! Please feel free to reach out if you have any additional questions.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Greetings	Good Day! Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me. As you are aware, I am interested in learning more about how managers understand their role in planning workplace learning for frontline employees. Feedback about your role and contributions as a manager is critical to this study. As stated in the request for interview and in the informed consent form, your identity will remain anonymous throughout this process. All feedback provided during this interview will be recorded, analyzed, and summarized for my dissertation. I would like to make this discussion very open and comfortable for you. I also hope that there is time at the end of the interview for you to ask any questions that you might have about my process and research interests. If you need to take a break at any point, please just let me know. For your reference, I would like to read you three definitions that are critical to the framing of this research study: *Middle Managers* – "the direct supervisors of the workers in their unit and are responsible for hiring, evaluation, and improvement of those workers" (Johansen & Hawes, 2016, p. 593). "employees with a supervisory capacity other than senior leaders (e.g., department managers, program managers, nurse managers, administrative directors, frontline supervisors)" (Engle et al., 2017) *Frontline Employees* - employees of a higher education institution, working in a direct, service-delivery capacity (Kurniatun & Rosalin, 2016). *Workplace Learning* (or training) - "the process used by individuals when engaged in training programs, education and development courses, or some type of experiential learning activity for the purpose of acquiring the competence necessary to meet current and future work requirements" (Jacobs & Parks, 2009, p. 134) In today's work world there are many ways for employees to learn–from traditional training to online as well as from other more experienced employees or team leaders. Most workplaces have formal (usually in-person or online training) and informal (learning from others; mentoring; independent learning, etc.).

Consent and Recording	Do I have your consent to record this interview and to take notes based on your responses to my questions?
Cadence 1: Scope of Middle Manager Role Johansen and Hawes (2016), Harding (2014), Engle et al. (2017), Mair (2002)	Please tell me about your work as a manager at [insert university name]. 1. Please tell me about your professional and academic background. How long have you been working as a manager? What is the last training or academic program you have completed? Have you received any training on developing or implementing training for your employees? 2. When you think about your day-to-day work routines, to what function(s) do you dedicate the majority of your time? 3. When you think about the mission of your university or college, how do you see your role fitting into that mission? 4. As a manager, how might you best describe your management approach/philosophy? What do you believe is similar and different about your approach as compared to other managers? 5. What is the biggest challenge you face in your role as a manager? 6. What do you find most difficult about passing on or implementing requirements of the university or college with your employees?
Cadence 2: **Direct Engagement with Employees** Johansen and Hawes (2016), Harding (2014), Engle et al. (2017), Mair (2002), Kyndt et al (2013), Kuriatun and Rosalin (2016)	How and how often do you directly engage with your employees? 1. How do you generally engage with your employees (text, phone call, face-to-face, virtual, on the job site, in meetings)? What are some examples of what you discuss? 2. What are the challenges of communicating with your employees? 3. What opportunities are there for employees to provide feedback to you (formally or informally)? 4. How well do your employees incorporate your feedback into their day-to-day work?

Cadence 3: **Understanding of Employees Learning Needs** Billet (1996), Jacobs and Park (2009), Russ-Eft (2002), Kyndt et al (2013)	How do employees learn here? 1. What percentage of employee learning is formal (%) versus informal (%)? 2. How much mandatory training are employees required to take annually (e.g., safety, anti-sexual harassment)? 3. How do you see your role in relation to employee learning and development? What actions do you take in support of their learning? 4. Do you implement training yourself? How? Is there a budget? An ability to give employees time off for training/learning? 5. How do you determine if training is effective? 6. Is there a feedback system in place for employees to be able to articulate or request training they believe they need? If so, how well does it work? 7. Does your employer have tuition remission benefits? To your knowledge, have any of your employees utilized this benefit for themselves?
Cadence 4: **Workplace Learning Practices** Billet (1996), Jacobs and Park (2009), Russ-Eft (2002)	1. How much time would you say that you spend developing training on a weekly basis? 2. How much time would you say that you spend implementing/facilitating workplace learning activities on a weekly basis? 3. Are you responsible for implementing workplace learning content that you did not create?
Conclusion	I have learned so much from our time together. Thank you again for making the time to participate in this interview process. I am grateful for your feedback and certain that it will contribute significantly to my research. Thank you!

APPENDIX H: SITE OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Questions to Ask Study Participants:

- Can you show me the spaces designated for employee learning?
- Are these spaces used for other purposes? If so, what are those other purposes?
- Do you have access to other spaces for employee learning?
- How do groups/teams gather here? Can an entire team utilize this space at one time?
- What challenges are presented by the configuration of the space?

Student Researcher Reflection Questions:

- Where is the space for learning in relation to other spaces on campus?
- What challenges to employee learning do you perceive from observing the space?
- What do you observe about interactions between employees and between the employees and manager?

APPENDIX I: DOCUMENT REVIEW CHECKLIST

- What documents were submitted by the study participant? Include a list of documents provided.
- What can you ascertain about the manager's role and business practices from the documents?
- What can you ascertain about the manager's role in implementing workplace learning for their employees?
- What reflections do you have?

APPENDIX J: FIRST LEVEL CODES TO THEMES

First Cycle Codes	
Recurring Codes: First cycle codes that recurred twice or more in the analysis of interview transcripts, site observation notes, and document review (Saldana, 2021) Unique Codes: First cycle codes that occurred once in the analysis of interview transcripts, site observation notes, and document review	
Recurring - 33 ● Access (13) ○ To training/of training ○ To leader ● Adult Learning Needs ● Assessment ● Barriers ● Biggest Challenge (14) ● Boundaries (9) ● Busy/Time ● Care for Employee (15) ● Change Management ● Chain of Command ● Coaching ● Communication (38) ● Directives (6) ● Disconnect (9) ● Emergency Response ● External Training ● Fear ● Majority of Time Spent ● Middle Manager ● Most Time Spent/Doing ● Open Door (7) ● Perception of Role (27) ● Performance ● Staff Engagement ● Staffing/Vacancy ● Time ● Train the Trainer ● Training (36) ● Training Effectiveness (4) ● Trust ● Tuition Benefit ● Why	**Unique - 19** ● COVID-19 ● EHS ● Family ● Formal/Informal ● KPIs/Metrics ● Level of Experience ● Life and Death Nature of Work ● Low Wage ● Meetings ● Morale ● Morning Huddle ● Personal Development ● Personality ● Policy/SOP ● Priorities ● Process ● Safety/Safety Training ● Service Delivery ● Value

• Working Way Up	
Data Converted to Charts in First Cycle and Not Included in 2nd Cycle Coding: • Methods of Communication Utilized by Middle Managers (Table 11) • Operational Meetings Reported by Study Participants and Observed During On-Site Observations (Table 12) • Hours Study Participants Spend Developing and Facilitating Workplace Learning Activities for Frontline Employees Per Week (Table 13) • Comparison of Formal vs Informal Workplace Learning Provided By The University (Table 14) • Mandatory Training for Frontline Employees Required by the University (Table 15)	

Second Cycle Codes	
Second Cycle Codes (39)	**Code Grouping (6)**
Care for Employee/Morale, Perception of role/emergency response role, Busy/Time, Open Door Policy, Staff Engagement, Trust, Juggling/Rollercoaster/Shifting Priorities, Personal Development/Ongoing Learning/Gender	Middle Manager (9)
Barriers to Learning, Job Skills, Job delegation to Contractors, Access to Communication, Leaders/Org. Level, Adult Learning/Frontline Employee Needs	Frontline Employees (6)
Process Breakdown, Accessibility to Development Opportunities/FLE Personal Expense for Training, Influence of Middle Manager on Employee Development, Tuition Benefit	Theoretical Correlations (4)
Value in Workplace Learning, Access to learning, Informal/Formal Training, External Training, Tuition Benefit, Compliance Training, Asynchronous/Synchronous Virtual Training, Mandatory Training	Workplace Learning (8)
Leadership Directives, Wanting to	Communication (6)

understand the “WHY”, Disconnect, “Open Door Policy”, Fear of Leadership Retaliation, Trust	
Access to Leaders as Middle Managers, Job Performance/Assessment/Effectiveness, “Chain of Command”, Staff Planning and Support (Vacancies, Learning Planning), Resources (Staff and Material), Policies/Processes/SOP’s	Leadership/Organization (6)

Codes to Themes	
Theme Development	
Code Grouping	**Theme**
Middle Manager	Theme 1: Middle Managers understand the critical nature of their role and despite their bandwidth being maxed out, they reported cultivating a team/organizational culture that supports frontline employee development, organizational performance, and the university mission.
Frontline Employee	Theme 2: Middle managers acknowledge that as a result of earning low wages, frontline employees work through personal circumstances that negatively impact their capacity to engage in workplace learning activities in comparison to other work groups.
Theoretical Correlations	Theme 3 - Middle managers acknowledge that they do not have the authority or resources to improve access to the learning opportunities frontline employees need for ongoing development.
Workplace Learning	Theme 4: Middle managers reported the benefits and barriers of structured and unstructured workplace learning in support of staff development and

	organizational performance. Middle Managers noted the gap in skills needed for them to design and implement workplace learning for frontline employees.
Communication	Theme 5: Middle Managers reported that even with best effort, communication between leaders and employees is disrupted and broken, triggering feelings of distrust (of leadership and the organization) and a sense of fear among the managerial and frontline teams.
Leadership/Organization	Theme 6: Middle Managers identified that university leadership is severely disconnected from the realities of the work experiences and needs of Middle Managers and Frontline Employees, which prevents them from being able to provide sufficient workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees.

APPENDIX K: THEMES AND CORRESPONDING DATA EXTRACTS

Theme 1 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers understand the critical nature of their role and despite their bandwidth being maxed out, they reported cultivating a team/organizational culture that supports frontline employee development, organizational performance, and the university mission.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Perception of role as a Middle Manager/Team Development	And I think I play a big role in that being the kinda middle person between upper management and the frontline staff. And I try to keep that attitude on a day-to-day basis, not switch up or be a different person. I'm still gonna be that person. If you have an issue, I'm gonna come help you. Not let you fend for yourself, if I know that you probably will fail.
Mission Alignment	Honestly, I think that the facilities department is the foundation of any mission of an academic institution. The reality is that if we have departments who say their mission is to further academic research excellence, you can't do that if you don't have lights and HVAC and clean spaces that are free of trash and debris. You can't do that if you don't have facilities.
Perception of Team Value	They just would not be able to succeed without our staff. And our staff are very much in need of professional development and opportunities to grow, to sustain themselves, to be retained at the institution. And so I think in order for us to achieve that goal of academic excellence, positive student life, better research, better medical, you know, every single thing that is kind of built into our different silos, I think the only way we can do that is when we support our staff in growing and sustaining their roles. And from a training and development standpoint, we hear so many issues with staff relationships, managers, how people engage with each other, and lack of opportunities to advance in their roles. And we've seen kind of through the pandemic how that had led to a historic loss in employees retention or attrition-wise in university history. So, I think of our role as responsive to the mission, but not as directly correlated as some people kind of might see it in other parts of the university.
Trust	Everybody wants to come and talk to the boss anyway. When they look at you as somebody they can really trust, look at you as a friend, look at them as somebody who always knows what to say, knows what to do, has their best interest in mind.
Time/Juggling Priorities	Everybody has so much going on. Even just here on shifts. That is the biggest challenge. Figuring out what the priorities are across the campus and how we can do it. Everyone thinks their need is the priority. The medical school has a need, dining has a need, but then I got athletics over here and they have a need. But then, here comes the residential buildings and they have a need. I think the problem is probably prioritization, right? It's figuring out what is the most important.

Team Development	And you have to be able to bring those people together and create some level of a cohesive team, because honestly, life may depend on it.
Care for Employee/Team Development	And we do from time to time, I take everybody to lunch together, get up off work and the thing is when we talk at lunch, we talk about families, vacations and good times. Things like that. One day when someone is trying to talk about work, I stop them. I said, this is our time together, not about work. Let's forget work, let's talk about us. So kind of like I know every one of them, their family, what they have that they know about my family, my kids, all that stuff.
On Site Observation	● Team members are always on the move - dashing from one place to another - working very hard to stay within perceived time constraints of their individual assignments or shift - generally speaking there is a sense of urgency associated with everyone's work ● Staff are pleasant - there are constant greetings echoed throughout the workspaces, hallways, and common areas ● Various levels of staff (frontline to leaders) gather briefly in passing in common areas (building lobbies, kitchenette areas, administrative offices, etc.) ● Culinary Managers spend a good portion of their shift supporting the team "on the line" at their various meal stations. Interactions are generally brief and mostly positive, especially when students are waiting to be served.
Document Review	Nothing relevant to this theme was captured in the document review

Theme 2 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers identified that university leadership is severely disconnected from the realities of the work experiences and needs of middle managers and frontline employees, which prevents them from being able to provide sufficient workplace learning opportunities for frontline employees.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Morale	It's kind of getting my voice heard or able to express my concerns and they're not falling on a deaf ear. It is more on the higher up aspect 'cause when it comes to our team in general, I guess I try to be the voice of reason. But then I'm seeing issues that upper management might not see or even know about when I speak to the morale of the workers and it seems like it's a disconnect between what they see and what's really happening. It's like, everything's kind of like a veil over their eyes where it's like, "Hey, you can call out these numbers." But it's like, let's think of the frontline staff. So it's a disconnect more in upper management.
Resources	Honestly, I would say lack of sufficient resources to accomplish our goals. Lack of technology, lack of tangible physical resources, unclear budget access. And I think those are really concrete barriers to efficiency. And because of that, we're spending a lot of time on things that don't allow us to actually meet some really great large training goals.
Resources/Limitations	I'll probably start with resources are also unclear and not well communicated. So, often we're just sort of operating almost with nothing. Like, just whatever we can do with our bodies and our computers. And so it's hard for me to answer that because there's so little access to information on resources and budget. It's pretty much sort of a mystery. And I think a lot of that shifted after COVID. And because of that, I am mostly operating with what I'm capable to do, capable of doing without having to request resources, which again, creates a lot of limitations on what we can do.
Directives	So I've dealt with it on both ends, resistance from my staff, as well as resistance from the people who I'm supposed to be getting resources from. So, you know, it's difficult sometimes when I want my staff to keep the kitchen as clean as possible, but we don't wanna give them any extra hours. So if I'm not getting resources from upper management to be able to give to my people what they need. That could be in the form of hours or in the form of even overtime, or whatever it may be, then it makes it difficult for me to do my job.
Decision Making	Somebody like the VP's level or the CFO's level. Right. Really, that affects all the way down to a custodial worker. And the leaders may say, well, ”we're gonna use this to clean this”. And the custodial worker knows, “well, we tried that or, that doesn't really work, 'cause it's not a very good product”.
Site Observations	● Absence of the presence of senior leadership in frontline employee workspaces or training spaces.

Document Review	● Absence of a formal training process for standard operating procedures, illuminating a gap in communication and work expectations for frontline employees (absence of senior leadership oversight and engagement in this process).

Theme 3 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers reported that even with best effort, communication between leaders and employees is disrupted and broken, triggering feelings of distrust (of leadership and the organization) and a sense of fear among the managerial and frontline teams.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Dissemination of Information	So one challenge is also that it just like sometimes doesn't get to me. Like sometimes, there are priorities at that level that I never hear about, that I don't know, and they don't know what we're doing. So I think one, the sort of layers of hierarchy create a lot of like telephone games which makes it challenging for me to communicate to a program coordinator why we need to like switch to Zoom registration. Like things that seem sort of trivial in some moments but actually do have an institutional impact.
Effective Communication	If I do send a message via email or text, sometimes it is not received as I would like to have it. Whether that's me neglecting to provide a detail to a situation or something or somebody not interpreting what I'm telling them in the correct way as well. I have to follow up.
Effective Communication	And we do see that, you know? I'll be honest. I think if anybody was really being honest with themselves, they could definitely look at our department and know and point out groups that have really good communication with their manager and groups that have really poor communication with their managers.
Employee Needs	But you have to think about who your audience is, right. And what their specialty is and what their skill level is, so that we don't miscommunicate something or speak in terms that people don't understand...That is huge. And that definitely comes down with the frontline staff, in other realms of the university, right. I'm not a plumber. But I'm trying to get something by, and they may use technical terms that I don't know, or they're using technical terms when they talk to me and that's where I think that face to face comes from 'cause I can give him a weird look if I don’t understand.
Service Delivery	Higher level leaders do not have a true understanding with the level of power they have at a great institution where they have the money to do it. They also should have the understanding. And so seeing that mismanagement, that poor management and a lot of times the end customer is suffering because of that, it's just a bad look outside of just... It's gonna affect bigger things in the future and so that is I guess what I'm seeing in my frustration and management. And the lack of them being able to support me properly because of that.
Site Observation	● A sense of caution or trepidation in how the room of leaders engaged with the most senior leader. ● Meetings are occurring all day long in conference rooms and private offices adjacent to team rooms. Different groups of people are in and out of meeting rooms all day. ● Signage on walls provides safety reminders and short instructional tips for regular operating procedures

	• Screens in common areas display team culture elements (birthdays, latest news, etc.), useful info about upcoming training/meetings, messaging and short instructional tutorials
Document Review	• Absence of a formal training process for standard operating procedures, illuminating a gap in communication and work expectations for frontline employees.

Theme 4 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers acknowledge that they do not have the authority or resources to improve access to the learning opportunities frontline employees need for ongoing development.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Process Breakdown	So there is unfortunately, and I think we just exposed a hole. There's no process for employee engagement and training. We, as in leadership, have just expected any employee that wants to commit, to say they wanna commit and come and show that commitment. We just don't have an outreach program to say, hey, team, these are your training opportunities. Take advantage of it. And that's outside of the external training, which we almost mandated, there is no process for sharing that information. I think we should have that. Like if we are truly advocating, and so maybe I'm not really advocating. I'm just waiting for people to take the responsibility themselves.
Accessibility to Development Opportunities/FLE personal expense for learning	If they were to try to move into a Chef's position, like actual upper management, they will require them to take some classes that they would have to get on their own.
Influence of Middle Manager on Employee Development/Tuition Benefit	Like, there came a point where I was speaking with a colleague and I was telling her, I was like, man, this just can't be, this can't be life. Like this can't be the end, and I was three years into about three or four years into my first position as a custodian. And she was like, well, there's classes here.
Tuition Benefit	Some people, and then the downside to that is we, the university doesn't have a lot of really maintenance classes. Things that they think now they have more project management and things like that. And some people have taken advantage of that.
Accessibility to Development Opportunities	I feel like that is not a formal system. So normally if employees are trying to communicate about training that they feel that they need, it's going to be reliant upon them having a good working relationship with their manager and feeling like they can talk to that manager to request that.
Lack of Resources	Honestly, I would say lack of sufficient resources to accomplish our goals. Lack of technology, lack of tangible physical resources, unclear budget access. And I think those are really concrete barriers to efficiency. And because of that, we're spending a lot of time on things that don't allow us to actually meet some really great large training goals.
Site Observations	Nothing relevant to this theme was captured in the site observation.
Document Review	Nothing relevant to this theme was captured in the document review.

Theme 5 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers reported the benefits and barriers of structured and unstructured workplace learning in support of staff development and organizational performance. Middle managers noted the gap in skills needed for them to design and implement workplace learning for frontline employees.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Value in WPL	When I started, there wasn't a great value in formal training, whereas now there is but there's still a lot of informal on-the-job experiences that the team learns and then applies to their day-to-day. I don't think the university put a great value in training it's frontline staff or leadership for that matter.
Value in WPL/Time	It's implementing a solid actionable training program for our frontline staff so that they can continue to gain valuable resources and expand in their expertise. Unfortunately, a lot of times we don't have the time to do that because we are still being reactive to the operational needs of the university.
On-Site Observation	• Training rooms were generally small and did not have enough seating for the average team - the same was true for training rooms with computers, there were not enough computer terminals for the average team • Technology is limited specifically in team/training spaces, most are not equipped with video conferencing capabilities eliminating the opportunity for synchronous or asynchronous, virtual training/meetings
Document Review	All training materials provided for the document review were provided in English, which is not the primary language for many of the frontline employees.
Barrier to Learning	So, I mean, just like everywhere in America, you know, it's beautiful, but half of my staff speak Spanish and half of my staff speak Haitian Creole, and I only speak English. I mean it's, you know, it forces you to, just like anything in management, to overcome some different obstacles, right? So, now, I'm doing trainings and I gotta... When I do a training, I have to print out everything in English, in French, and in Spanish, right? So I can make sure that all of my team has everything, and make sure that everybody has the information given to them.
Barrier to Learning	But tech is a barrier to attending the trainings in general for a lot of folks because we've moved fully remote. But the reason we've moved fully remote is 'cause no one shows up to the in-person trainings where we've paid for rooms consistently over the last two years. So we've had a lot of shocking sort of pushback on, in-person training that I never thought I would see after Covid, but has definitely changed the landscape of how we manage things.
Barrier to Learning	We just changed over to a new work management program, so it's been

	many issues with that. So I just remind people when you're clocking in and out, you might have to erase the app or close out the app on your phone and log back in. I know it's a lot of steps, and hopefully, they'll work that out soon. But, that's just training that basically, kinda, we have to do that every morning. Yeah. I say the majority of the training is based on technology.
WPL Design	Get educational training, props and help build our training out. I think that PowerPoints are good training. It's a good way to do things, but not everybody can take information from a screen and digest it. Some people digest stuff by motion and hands and doing things right. Physically doing it. So I feel that's a big thing, right? If I could have more hands-on stuff and whatnot that we could get through to this better through those to those people that don't necessarily have that best learning skill of finger or screen to brain.
WPL Design	In terms of formal training for all learning and development, maybe even less than 5%. That's just my guess. There are so few opportunities available to people. There's also so much, so many silos that it's very difficult for us to keep up with what's going on in areas where they just choose to kind of decide what they do for training without telling us. And I think that is actually one of the greatest flaws of the institution is that there's so much dependence on see and do versus being taught and then executing on what you've been taught.
WPL Availability/Accessibility	One thing that XX has not historically been good with is training, so that's something that we are developing right now. We have a new training program in place and it's based by shop. It's strictly online. You take it from a tablet, you take it from a phone, where it's self-guided, pretty much. So that's like formal training.
WPL Availability/Accessibility	We wouldn't even, yeah, we wouldn't, even be sending anybody else out...external training is just for leaders, for sure.
On the Job Training	What I call, on the job…I show you how to do it, then I ask you to repeat it. And so you learn by doing it yourself, and hopefully, we transfer the knowledge and the skill for that task is by you actually doing it...That's that's one way it can be done. And that's, and that can be done with a supervisor doing it, but what I prefer or what I like is to be peer to peer...They're gonna come up with a better result 'cause they see that, okay, somebody that's on the same level with me is trying to help me get to learn and get better.

Theme 6 Supporting Data Extracts

Middle managers acknowledge that as a result of earning low wages, frontline employees work through personal circumstances that negatively impact their capacity to engage in workplace learning activities in comparison to other work groups.	
Code	**Participant Extract**
Emergency Response Demand for FLE	Whatever happens at the university doesn't affect our status. We still come in, we still act as if the... It's a regular workday and passing that down to the employees from leadership, you forget that employees don't, aren't sharing the same benefits that you may have. And so they have to still get in regardless of what happens, what's going on out in the world. They still have to leave their families regardless of what's happening, regardless of what's going on in the world, even though their families may not have to, may not be well, may have to still be home, they have to now find a way to get to work and supplement care for their family. And that's difficult for frontline staff who are making minimum, level of minimum wages.
Work Requirement on FLE	We can't drive carts outside of the central campus. But historically, they've been driving carts to this area, and so it is gonna have a direct impact on my shop's operations and how we manage to work. And so, but I don't agree with that. It is what it is. I have to hold folks accountable and I have to enforce it.
Accessibility to Development Opportunities/FLE personal expense for learning	If they were to try to move into a Chef's position, like actual upper management, they will require them to take some classes that they would have to get on their own.
Low wage impacts on FLE/Barriers for FLE	Sometimes they work a second job. So she has to come here after, so she doesn't start. So about 2:30, 2:15, 2:40 depending on traffic in the cities....But we give them a day off. Gotta help offset. And sometimes that interferes with their other job. So what I did to mitigate that was I made the schedule for this year, finished it off, and then made an entire 2025 schedule so they know for the next year what they're working and no one can edit it.
Low wage impacts on FLE/Barriers for FLE	A lot of them don't drive. And so they have to, they have to commute on public transportation. And that's a barrier. And if I am, if I was still a frontline staff member to think like, hey, I have to get off at 4:00 and I got to get the class by 4:30, I'm not gonna be able to do it. And if management doesn't offer the option, like, hey, we may be able to help you if this is something you wanna do, their needs aren't being fully met.
Working Up	Like, there came a point where I was speaking with my supervisor and I was telling her, I was like, man, this just can't be, this can't be life. Like this can't be the end, and I was three years into about three or four years into my first position as a custodian. And she was like, "well, there's

	classes here". And she walked me through the process to begin classes in the business school.
Site Observations	Nothing relevant to this theme was captured in the site observation
Document Review	Nothing relevant to this theme was captured in the document review