

# Chapter 2

## Employee Strategies in Organising Professional Development

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### 2.1 Employee Strategies and Professional Development

Employees in the twenty-first century are given great responsibility in organising professional development. Increasingly their own input is called upon; in pursuing lifelong learning, in preserving their employability, in creating a career development plan, and in using the learning opportunities available in the workplace. This tendency has considerable implications for organising human resource development (HRD) in organisations. HRD comprises a complex constellation of actors, structures, facilities and processes for learning and development (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). Every employee needs to create their own path through this learning landscape. Thus, they need to operate strategically when it comes to organising their own professional development, with a view to acquiring the qualities that will enable them to conduct their present job, to obtain new/better positions in the labour market and to realise the necessary personal development.

One might argue that there is nothing new under the sun; self-directed learning by employees has surely been on the agenda for decades already? Nonetheless, HRD practices and the roles of employees in them are changing so dramatically in the twenty-first century that individual self-direction is no longer sufficient for employees to organise their professional development (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). A major change in the existing HRD theory will be necessary to be able to better analyse the developments in organising professional development and to support organisational practices around HRD. The aim of this chapter is to contribute

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to such a change, by showing that employees can operate strategically in several ways when it comes to organising their own professional development.

The chapter will first describe two major changes that are to be expected in organising professional development, which have far-reaching implications for the roles of employees. First, a shift from a didactical to a strategic role, and, second, a shift from directing their professional development individually to doing so within a network of actors. The chapter will continue by presenting an employee perspective on organising professional development, which holds several ways for employees to operate strategically. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss existing empirical research about employees' professional development strategies and confront the results with theory. The chapter will finish with a number of suggestions for further research into employee strategies for organising professional development.

## **2.2 Changes in the Roles of Employees in Organising Their Professional Development**

Fundamental changes are expected in the roles of employees in organising their professional development. These expectations relate to two trends for change:

- from didactic to strategic issues
- from individual self-direction to operating in an actor network

### ***2.2.1 From Didactic to Strategic Issues: A Threefold Strategic Challenge***

In literature, self-directed learning by employees is often viewed as a didactic issue (Bolhuis & Simons, 1999). Self-direction is focused on adjusting the learning process in such a way that learning targets are achieved. How employees themselves can play a substantive role in the management and direction of their professional development is barely discussed. In other words: it is almost entirely unrecognised that employees struggle with strategic issues in organising their professional development and yet that is clearly the case. After all, employees are expected to take account of three orientations. Employees are required to focus attention on (a) executing and improving their current work; (b) their employability on the internal and external labour market in the longer term and (c) their personal development as the basis for their further career and lifelong learning.

Firstly, in their professional development they will have to take account of their current work. A whole raft of changes is taking place in their work which they will have to learn to deal with. Secondly, in organising their professional development, maintaining and strengthening their position on the internal and external labour market is a clear point for attention. This is often designated as the employability

issue. Thirdly, as well as focusing on their work and their position on the labour market, employees will also have to consider their personal development. This does not merely mean the qualities that they need in other areas of their life – such as their private life or their role as a citizen – but also personal qualities that form the basis for their working life. They will for example have to learn how to take personal responsibility, to stand up for their own ideas and interests, and to manage their own career (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007).

In other words, employees face a threefold strategic challenge in their professional development. We would like to specifically point out that it is by no means logical that these challenge elements tie in with or underpin one another. In modern society, it is a far more difficult challenge to ensure that work and career make a positive contribution to personal development (Van Hoof, 2001). Experiences in their current employment environment will not always contribute to an interesting career (Korver, 2009). If employees focus above all on improving their performance in their current position, and as such above all develop job-specific qualities, they could in fact even worsen their position on the labour market as a result (De Beer, 2009).

### ***2.2.2 From Individual Self-Direction to Operating in an Actor Network***

There can be no doubt that the characteristics of employees have a major influence on their professional development (Poell, 2006; Raemdonck, 2006). Their own values and standards, their knowledge and skills and their learning motivation have a major influence on the progress of their learning processes. This realisation forms the background to the central role awarded to employees in organising their professional development. Self-direction is more effective because it acts as a greater motivator to employees, and offers them more possibilities for a tailor-made approach. Take for example theories on self-motivation for learning (the so-called *self-determination theory*; Martens, 2007), the self-direction of learning processes by employees (Bolhuis, 2000; Ratering & Hafkamp, 2000) and self-direction in groups and teams (see for example the communities of practice in Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

There are, however, other actors who wish to have an influence on the professional development of employees and who wish to help define the substantive direction taken in that development. Each of those actors – managers, colleagues, trade unions, government bodies, customers, HRD specialists and HRM managers – have their own interests in and their own visions on the professional development of employees. For employees, professional development is not only their own individual responsibility, but also requires them to learn to play the game with other actors in the learning network: namely involving other actors in their professional development, attempting to obtain their support and at the same time gaining an

understanding of their possibilities and interests. Increasingly, the employees are becoming actors who, in a complex interplay with other actors, are required to direct their own professional development, within a network.

## **2.3 Strategies from the Perspective of the Employee: The Learning-Path Cycle**

Employees are the driving force behind many processes in organisations, even though employees can differ considerably in terms of their agency and workplaces can differ significantly when it comes to the learning opportunities they afford employees (Billett, 2001). Certainly in the organisation of processes aimed at training and development, they are the key actors who, together with actors in and around organisations, work on their professional development and thereby make use of structures and facilities. They too will have to start to operate strategically in organising their professional development. But what exactly does that mean, and how can employees arrive at that situation?

In the learning-network theory (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007), one of the central questions is: how can employees organise their own professional development in learning networks? In that process, the creation of learning paths is the HRD process within which employees have numerous opportunities to direct their professional development and to follow a strategic approach.

### ***2.3.1 From Strategic Planning to Operating Strategically: Learning-Action Theories as a Framework***

Generally speaking, ‘strategy’ is linked to what ‘an organisation’ and ‘the management’ do. They develop a strategy or course on the basis of which guidelines are derived for actions in and by the organisation. However, how should we view employees’ operating strategically, when it comes to their professional development?

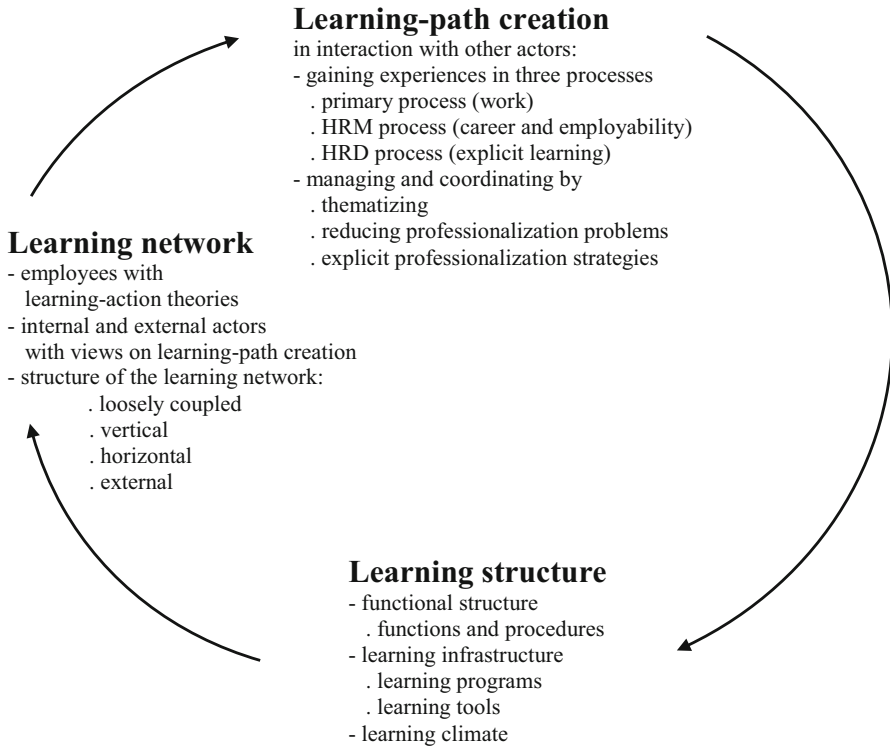
In many cases, operating strategically is summarised as the development and subsequent execution of a strategy. This is one of the possibilities of strategic operation, which we have designated as strategic planning and execution. However, there are other forms of operating strategically. In this vision on operating strategically by employees, we allow ourselves to be inspired by the vision of Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998), in particular by the approach they describe as the ‘learning approach’ to strategy forming. The core of that learning approach is that actors – and although what they intended was an organisation, their vision on strategy forming can be applied to all actors – acquires experiences over the course of time, from which they can learn what they consider important, and how they can best achieve

those important values. Mintzberg et al. suggest that a strategy first emerges as a pattern from the past, subsequently perhaps becomes a plan for the future, and eventually develops into an approach that helps direct the operations of actors. This approach may be more or less fully developed, and may change over the course of time. After all, as time goes by, an actor ‘learns’ different forms of operating strategically.

Employees – who are these actors – can also have just such an approach when it comes to organising their professional development. They can perfect that approach over the course of time and as time passes, learns to operate successfully in their professional development. We describe this method of approach and action as their learning-action theory (cf. Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Employees can also make their learning-action theory quite explicit. That explicit theory is then the approach and the mode of operation they explicitly employ in organising HRD, based on his own values. In many cases, however, such a learning-action theory will only be made explicit to a limited degree. Nonetheless, even with a learning-action theory that is not completely explicit, the values of employees can be used to direct their professional development. Values and standards are expressed whenever employees experiences problems in their professional development; their goal will be to reduce those problems, and in that process, will allow themselves to be guided by their own learning-action theory. The same learning-action theory can also come under threat whenever employees are forced to choose to acquire particular types of experience, for example in their work, if they are forced to opt for a new job or if they wish to develop specific personal qualities. In such situations – which are often referred to as strategic choice situations – personal learning-action theory will serve as a guideline for their actions. Employees can also use their learning-action theory when they wish to identify learning themes about which they prefer to acquire systematic experiences.

We can distinguish between four clusters of values and standards that serve as the driving forces for employees in organising their professional development. These clusters relate to their professionalism, their personal entrepreneurship, their employeeship and their membership of social groups (Hendrix, 2008; Knip, 2007). The *profession-driven learning-action theory* is based on the values that hold sway in the profession (for example among doctors or teachers). Professionals themselves underwrite those same values; in literature, this is often described as the professional identity of the employee. In the *person-driven learning-action theory*, the employee considers it important to face up to challenges, to be able to exercise an influence, and thus to be able to express their own qualities. This value orientation is strongly related to personal entrepreneurship. The *work-driven learning-action theory* is the consequence of a striving for security, and acting in accordance with agreements previously reached. Employees who operate according to this learning-action theory likely view learning and working as an obligation, and expect to receive the resultant (material and non-material) rewards. The *socially-driven learning-action theory* is based on solidarity and social acceptance. People who apply this learning-action theory feel responsible for one another, and wish to establish social ties with one another, in which the overruling pattern is equality.



**Fig. 2.1** Organising a learning path in a cycle: Structure of the learning network the learning-path cycle (Based on Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007)

### 2.3.2 The Learning-Path Cycle

Employees can participate in a range of different HRD processes, such as learning policy forming, learning programmes, learning processes and learning-path creation (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). Here, learning-path creation is the most important process for employees in directing their own professional development. In such a process, in interaction with other actors, employees acquire a range of different experiences – in executing and improving their work, in working on their career and in explicit learning activities – and together with other actors, the individual employee is able to thereby direct each of those experiences.

Learning-path creation takes place within a cycle, as indicated in Fig. 2.1 (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). Employees create their own learning paths in the context of the existing learning network, which comprises all other relevant actors as well, each with their own views, beliefs and interests when it comes to organizing

learning. The structure of this learning network can be more or less loosely coupled, vertical, horizontal or external.

Learning-path creation is something employees do in interaction with other actors by gaining experiences in three organizational processes: (1) the primary work process, which affords them various opportunities for development; (2) the HRM process, in which career planning and employability are key notions; and (3) the HRD process, which focuses explicitly on employee learning (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). As will be elaborated upon below, the process of learning-path creation can be managed and coordinated by the employee through thematizing, through reducing professionalization problems and through explicit professionalization strategies.

Employees creating their own learning paths can influence the existing learning structure in the organization, which is comprised of the functions and procedures around learning (functional structure), the learning programs and tools (infrastructure), and the dominant ways of doing concerning learning (climate) (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). This learning structure, in turn, forms the context in which the constellation of actors needs to operate as they create learning paths. In this way the cycle is completed.

2.4 Three Strategic Access Routes for Operating Strategically by Employees

The learning-path cycle explains how employees are able to operate strategically in organising their professional development. From the learning-path cycle, we can identify three access routes for employees for operating strategically see Table 2.1: following existing structures and actors, aspect-based strategic operation and integrated strategic operation.

Table 2.1 Possibilities for employees to operate strategically in creating learning paths

1.	Following existing structures and actors	Following automatically
		Following deliberately, on the basis of strategic considerations
2.	Aspect-based strategic operation	(a) Mobilizing actors: which actors should be involved in the learning-path creation?
		(b) Creating a mix of experiences: using work and/or explicit HRD experiences
		(c) Directing: directing the learning path as you go or according to a plan
3.	Integrated strategic operation	Developing and executing an explicit strategy

### ***2.4.1 Following Existing Structures and Actors***

In this approach, an employee follows the existing structures and the wishes and ideas of other actors. The employee imposes few personal accents and deviates minimally from the structures and the plans and ideas of others. He can ‘blindly’ follow the structures and ideas of other actors, but it is also possible for him to take up this approach on the basis of strategic considerations. In that situation, he believes that sufficient of his own ideas can be realised in the current approach. This approach is dominant in most of the extant HRD/HRM research (e.g., DeSimone & Werner, 2012).

Operating in learning-path creation according to the existing structures and the wishes of other (powerful) actors can for example take place in a (bureaucratic) organisation where well-elaborated procedures exist, and in which the management and HRD specialists and HRM officers occupy powerful positions in the learning network. In professional organisations, employees above all follow ideas and plans of external bodies and colleagues. In entrepreneurial organisations, with their disconnected learning networks, they are often forced to rely on their own attitudes and wishes in directing their professional development. In organic organisations, with horizontal learning networks, the probability is high that employees will follow the ideas of the group and the group members. In this ‘following’ approach to operation, an employee will often nonetheless introduce his own accents. This happens because his own visions and attitudes play a major role in his interpretations of the learning structure, the learning network structure and the actions of other actors. (Often unconsciously), the employees will create for themselves a picture of the situation, and act accordingly (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007).

### ***2.4.2 Aspect-Based Strategic Operation***

Learning-path creation focuses on three elements: interactions with specific actors, acquiring specific experiences, and management and coordination. Each of these three elements can be used by employees to influence the learning-path creation. Employees can do this by mobilising (specific) actors, by focusing emphasis on specific experiences and by managing or directing their own learning path in a particular manner (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007).

#### ***2.4.2.1 Mobilising Actors***

Employees can deliberately employ other actors for achieving their own ideas on their professional development. They can involve other actors – for example their internal and external colleagues, managers, (internal and external) trainers and learning advisors and HRM officers – in their attempts to give form to their



professional development. Mobilising those actors can take place while acquiring experiences – in work, career and HRD processes – or in managing those experiences.

In creating their learning paths, employees can attempt to involve other actors who occupy strong positions in the learning network, to encourage powerful actors to support their plan, and together with them, acquire experiences and direct those powerful actors. If they are unable to achieve their own ideas on professional development in a given situation, they can for example go in search of managers who they know to be positive in respect of their ideas. Together with them, they can attempt to adjust the learning structure and learning network structure in such a way that they can then work towards the learning-path creation, according to their own ideas.

For employees, involving external actors in their learning-path creation can also be an interesting option. Actors from outside the organisation are often independent – for example representatives of trade unions and professional associations – and can often apply the power arising from their specific expertise – such as HRD specialists from external consultancy firms – to support them and to bring about changes in the structures.

#### **2.4.2.2 Strategically Deploying Work Experiences and HRD Experiences**

Another important strategic option is to create and use specific experiences. Above all the mix of work experiences and explicit learning experiences, and the bringing together of these two types of experience are crucial for professional development of employees (Ministries of OCW/SZW, 2009).

Integrating work and learning has been a dominant school of thought over the past few years: working = learning. This has applied to such an extent that explicit learning is at risk of being neglected. Employees should in fact be able to focus the accent more on explicit learning experiences in connection with their position on the labour market, and the acquisition of new experiences. In the creation of learning paths, it is important to make sure that a good mix is created of explicit learning experiences and work experiences. Employees must be able to acquire sufficient experiences in their work to be able to compensate for problems arising at the interface between learning activities and work. Managers can concentrate on this aspect, as can trainers, and of course the employees themselves!

#### **2.4.2.3 Planning Learning Paths in Advance, or Directing While Doing**

The systematic planning of professional development of employees by managers, trainers and HRM officers continues to be a dominant element of theory of organising HRD. Nonetheless, employees themselves can be more responsible for the direction of their learning paths. They can do this by developing their own strategic individual learning plans, but at the same time the processes of thematization and

problematization in learning-path creation both offer employees opportunities to direct their learning paths ‘while they work’.

When it comes to thematization, an employee can take an overall learning idea as the starting point and then further elaborate on that idea during the creation of the learning path together with his working and learning experiences. This can easily result in the ability of the employee, over the course of time, to formulate learning objectives, and to efficiently and with a clear focus work further on achieving those learning objectives. In the case of thematization, an employee can also build on positive experiences – and not only problems – that he acquires on the learning path (cf. the methods in ‘appreciative inquiry’, Tjepkema & Verheijen, 2009).

Tackling the problems that arise in the learning path also offers possibilities for adjusting the learning path as it develops. This is not merely a question of making the learning path itself more effective. Employees can also attempt to make the learning path ‘more congenial’, in other words making it tie in better with their own ideas on acquiring experiences.

### ***2.4.3 Integrated Strategic Operation***

Generally speaking, employees will have a broad idea on how they can organise their professional development, and which elements they consider important. They can however make those ideas more explicit. This enables them to gain a greater insight into the strategic elements of their activities and the relationships between those strategic elements. Employees can also develop an all-encompassing strategic plan, and make use of that plan in undertaking activities in learning-path creation. In developing this plan, they are guided by their own vision on professional development and the ways in which that development should be tackled in the situation in which they find themselves. In that connection their position in the learning network and the learning structure play an important role. This approach draws on ideas about personal development plans (PDPs), although it emphasizes the employees as pro-active champions of their own development, rather than as a passive recipient of development goals drafted by their manager (Habraken, Büchel, & Hafkamp, 2004).

## **2.5 Research into Operating Strategically by Employees**

As we have seen, employees can introduce their own accents to their learning paths, in a number of different ways, and operate strategically in their own way. Although little research has been carried out so far, which explicitly investigates the organisation of learning paths by employees, research into learning activities in companies has provided some empirically-supported indications about how employees can lay

out their path in the wide variety of possible experiences in and around organisations. We will discuss these briefly.

### ***2.5.1 Use of Personal Development Plans***

A recent innovation in the field of managing professional development by employees is the introduction of the personal development plan (Habraken et al., 2004; Pool & Van der Bijl, 2000; Van Berlo & Van Lonkhuyzen, 2009). In such a plan, individual employees, generally together with his managers, draw up a plan that lays down a course for their learning activity in a given period.

Empirical studies into personal development plans in practice reveal that employees find it difficult to work successfully with such plans (Fenwick, 2003; Habraken et al., 2004; Halbertsma & Ratering, 2003; Janssen, 2009; Van der Bijl, Muller, & Pool, 2003). Furthermore, we must consider that personal development plans are probably less commonplace than is generally assumed (Ott, Van Dijk, & Messchendorp, 2004; Seezink, 2009).

### ***2.5.2 The Role of Employees in Employability in Organisations***

Increasingly, employability is becoming a personal responsibility of individual employees. Employees themselves must focus their attention on their position on the labour market, and help direct their own career. In that process, they can make use of their own professional development.

Research was carried out by the CNV trade union (Dik, 2002) into the theme of employability in 19 organisations. In all of these organisations, working towards employability in line with personal capabilities and wishes is considered an individual responsibility of the employee, while in a number of institutions it is viewed as a shared responsibility. In this framework, almost exclusively, use is made of training, and even then training that is directly relevant to the fulfilment of tasks in the workplace. The one-sided deployment of instruments (training) for employability is also reflected in a large-scale study by De Vries, Gründemann, and Van Vuuren (2000) into employability policy in organisations.

Forrier is one of the few who have carried out empirical studies (Forrier & Sels, 2003) into the training participation by employees, and their position on the internal labour market. Her studies revealed among other things that temporary employees more often tend to invest in training than ‘permanent’ employees. This investment is above all made in training courses which could strengthen their position on the labour market. It is interesting to note that companies often provide training courses with a view to improving performance in the employee’s current position, and less

with a view to future positions or labour market opportunities. For employees, the position on the labour market is apparently an important consideration, while the management is focused more on reducing problems in the current work situation.

De Vos, Dewittinck, and Buyens (2007) undertook research in six organisations into the degree to which employees direct their own career and the support offered to them in that process by the organisation. The direction chosen by employees themselves and the support they receive from the organisation both have a clear influence on career success. De Vos et al. also identified indications that self-direction by the employee cannot automatically be viewed as a substitute for career support from the organisation.

### ***2.5.3 Learning Paths in Organisations***

Specific research focused on learning paths has to date above all been undertaken to determine how employees work on their own professional development. These studies are above all focused on learning skills. In studies among nursing staff and teachers, the emphasis was on forms of learning and learning environments. Initial studies among probation officers focused on the way in which they create and direct learning paths, and the substantive accent they apply within those paths.

#### **2.5.3.1 Learning Paths Among Nurses**

In a study into health care, an attempt was made to chart out the learning paths followed by nursing staff (Lisman, Natte & Poell, 2007). The researchers identified four learning aspects according to which learning paths can be described, namely the learning theme (i.e. the subject of the learning), the learning form (i.e. how people learn), the learning environment (in what social network learning takes place) and the learning facilities (the support provided for learning). The analysis of data about the individual learning paths of almost 100 nurses employed in various hospitals identified four types of learning paths, which have been designated as follows

- the self-managed learning path (25 %), with an accent on the importance of the learning environment itself;
- the formal-external learning path (34 %), with an accent on the importance of learning forms in a formal setting (for example in vocational education);
- the social-emotional learning path (25 %), with an accent on the importance of learning themes, for example ‘counselling’ and ‘information provision’;
- the information-oriented learning path (17 %), with clear accents on learning through theory, through reflection and the consultation of experts.

An essential criterion for all four types is the learning environment. In all four learning paths, it turns out that social interaction is vital, but in different ways. In the

self-managed learning path, the individual structure is very important, as is the role of the manager. The formal-external learning path is characterised by considerable interaction with others, in formal learning settings. In the third type, the social-emotional learning path, contacts with patients and their family play a major role. In the information-oriented learning path, reflection and interaction with experts are common.

### **2.5.3.2 Learning Paths and Professional Development Among Teachers**

Some empirical research has now become available into learning paths in the practice of the teaching profession. These studies above all focus on the processes and situations employed by teachers in their professional development. Gajadhar (2007) investigated the learning paths of 32 experienced teachers in a secondary school, in the form of personal interviews. She was able to identify four learning paths. She characterised these learning paths as:

- self-reflecting learning path, with as its central theme professional improvement and individual, critical reflection as its characteristic learning form;
- formal subject-didactic learning path, with a didactic learning theme and courses involving self-study as the characteristic learning form;
- private-focused learning path, with as its dominant characteristic learning in private situations;
- innovation-oriented learning path, in which the learning theme above all relates to new developments in education, a theme which is then tackled directly in a range of learning forms.

In a study involving 24 teachers at a secondary school, Schietecat (2007) proved unable to identify any different types of learning path. He was able to specify learning paths in the interviews with the teachers – on the basis of learning theme, learning form, learning environment and learning facility – but even within the same school, these learning paths varied very considerably. He identified as a possible explanation for the huge variety of learning paths the disconnected learning network, and the learning climate in the school in question. Within that particular school, the teachers were given considerable freedom in setting the course of their own professional development.

### **2.5.3.3 Learning Paths Among Probation Officers**

An initial study was recently undertaken into the learning paths among probation officers. In this study, 28 probation officers were questioned in detail about the ways in which they create and direct their learning paths. One finding from this study is that five learning paths could be identified (Khaled, 2008; Sloots, 2008). These learning paths, it seems, are above all based on the themes related directly to the work of the officers in question. The five learning paths were identified as

- practice-based learning path; this learning path is primarily based on improving the process of service provision. For example, the officer selected a learning theme on motivating interview techniques, or learning to deal with clients with psychological problems. The officers worked on this theme by sharing experiences from professional practice with one another, in discussions of case histories, consultation meetings with colleagues, and work supervision sessions.
- knowledge-oriented learning path; characteristic of this learning path is that themes are selected that help generate new (scientific) insights relevant to the field of work of the employees. For example, the probation officers wanted to know more about specific psychiatric disorders among their clients. They attempted to acquire this knowledge by studying specialist literature or by inviting experts to discussion sessions.
- task-oriented learning path; this learning path is primarily aimed at obtaining or optimising a particular position. Particular issues relevant to that position are then taken as themes for the learning path. Within this learning path, employees above all learn by participating in specific learning environments, for example work discussion meetings and consultation sessions with experienced colleagues.
- social learning path; within this learning path, the chosen themes relate to the acquisition of skills relevant to working with colleagues. The learning theme focuses on social interaction, appreciation of others and appreciation of individual roles within the team.
- person-oriented learning path; probation officers who learn according to this learning path are driven by a theme that relates to their private (home) situation.

It was remarkable that despite the deliberate attempts made within the intensive interviews, in the case of 10 of the 28 probation officers, no learning theme was 'found'. These officers were unable to identify a particular theme about which they had recently acquired experiences relevant to learning, and to which they had deliberately given real thought.

## **2.6 Further Studies on Professionalization Strategies Among Employees**

On the basis of the learning-path cycle, we have shown that employees are able to operate strategically in various different ways, in organising their learning paths. The possibilities range from following existing forces and structures, via influencing specific aspects through to the integrated management of their learning paths on the basis of an explicit strategic vision. We then discussed studies into the strategic practices of employees in organisations. These studies among nurses, teachers and probation officers showed us that, also in organizational practice, employees can operate strategically by creating learning paths and they do so in various different

ways. What, then, can we learn from these considerations, for further studies into the professionalization strategies of employees in organisations?

If we place the practical findings in the learning-path cycle with the various strategic options, we are able to conclude that employees themselves are only able to a very limited extent to explicitly make use of the possibilities for introducing their own accents to their learning paths. Within their professional development, employees only collaborate with other actors to a limited degree, make use of their experiences in a relatively random manner, and are only able to a very limited extent to manage their learning paths through thematization or by tackling their professionalization problems, let alone operating in an explicitly strategic manner, in creating their learning paths. They above all organise their learning paths intuitively, in accordance with their own, often implicit ideas, and by deploying their own qualities, and making use of the available learning facilities and other learning structures, in their own way.

In other words, the study reveals that employees above all follow the existing structures and actors, and to a limited degree operate according to particular aspects. There is almost no evidence of integrated strategic operation. In further developing ideas on employees operating strategically, we should assume this situation within organisations: within the learning-path cycle, employees operate according to ‘following’ and ‘aspect-based’ strategies. We could also tie in with the observed trend that employees themselves should be developing ideas on the directions in which they wish to develop (from operating didactically to strategically), and that the management of professional development should become an interplay between various actors (from individual self-direction to operating in an actor network).

### ***2.6.1 Contributing to Management According to a Personal Learning-Action Theory***

In managing their own professional development, the learning-action theory of employees plays an important role. They have a number of ideas (often still only in outline) about what they consider important in their professional development, and how they could tackle that development process. They can develop their own learning-action theory. They acquire experiences from which they could learn how to organise their own professional development within the organisation in which they are employed. For example, they notice that certain actors are willing to support them, that more facilities and support are available to them from outside the institution, that the existing learning structures offer more possibilities than they previously believed, and that they would perhaps be better to trust their own learning ideas and learning wishes. In this way, they can develop their own learning-action theory, in the process of actually developing that theory (i.e. learning by doing). This is extremely important, because it means that according to that learning-action theory, they can adjust their own learning paths, as they go. After all, it is

their own learning-action theory that forms the framework in interpreting and reducing their problems in the creation of the learning path, and also forms the basis for their explicit strategies. In other words, they learn to operate strategically by actually doing it (i.e. as compared to learning by acquiring work experience)!

### ***2.6.2 Mobilising Other Actors from Within Existing Learning Networks***

In many organisations, a set of relationships have been established between actors, over the course of years. In other words, learning networks become more or less vertical, more or less horizontal and more or less external (Poell, 2006; Van Der Krogt, 2007). In principle, employees have two options for dealing with the learning networks which have gradually come into existence in practice: either they operate according to the existing learning network structure or they specifically introduce different accents within that structure. The most important element is that within the creation of the learning path, they are also able to move outside the traditional learning networks in the organisation, as a consequence of which they are able to deliver new impulses to the learning paths.

The individual, often informal, personal network is an essential means of breaking free from the existing structures and actors. This is what the verb ‘networking’ generally refers to. However, in principle there are far more possibilities for breaking free from the existing learning network. If within an organisation the horizontal learning network is fairly dominant, an employee could attempt to add more vertical elements to that network, by involving more staff officers or line managers. Another important possibility is to strengthen the external dimension, for example by calling in external consultants or by approaching professional colleagues from other organisations or fellow professionals from other sectors. Employees could also attempt to change the existing power relationships in the learning network by calling in other actors. They could for example attempt to involve clients or representatives of client organisations for whom they work.

How employees operate strategically deserves further study and empirical research, so that realistic suggestions can be made that can then be used by the employees in organising their professional development.

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