

## **Firm size and workplace learning processes: a study of the restaurant sector**

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### **Abstract**

#### *Purpose*

The paper asks how workplace learning environments change as firm size increases, and how employees respond to this. In doing so, it looks beyond an exclusive focus on formal training, and incorporates more informal, work-based learning processes.

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

The study employs a qualitative research design, utilising semi-structured interviews with an under-researched group of workers – waiting staff in restaurants. The data were collected from six restaurants of different sizes.

#### *Findings*

As formally-instituted HRD structures expand as firm size increases, this leaves less room for individual choice and agency in shaping the learning process. This does not inevitably constrain or enhance workplace learning, and can be experienced either negatively or positively by employees, depending on their previous working and learning experiences.

#### *Research limitations/implications*

Future research on HRD and workplace learning should acknowledge both formal and informal learning processes, and the interaction between them – particularly in small and growing firms. Research is needed in a wider range of sectors.

#### *Practical implications*

There are implications for managers in small, growing firms, in terms of how they maintain space for informal learning as formal HRD structures expand, and how they support learners who may struggle in less structured learning environments.

#### *Originality/value*

The paper extends current understanding of how the workplace learning environment – beyond a narrow focus on ‘training’ – changes as firm size increases.

**Keywords:** Workplace learning; training; HRD; informal learning; small firms; firm size; restaurants

## Introduction

In the UK, as across much of the world, small firms (defined as those employing fewer than 50 people) employ around half of the private sector workforce (DBEIS, 2018). It is therefore perhaps surprising, given their importance, that human resource development (HRD) in small firms remains an under-researched area. Yet, it has received increasing attention in recent years; for example, it is now well-established that small firms, on average, participate less in formal training than do their larger counterparts (e.g. OECD, 2013). At the same time, some writers (see e.g. Bishop 2017) have identified a tendency within small businesses to rely more heavily on *informal* modes of skill formation (e.g. learning by doing, through the process of work itself, or by networking).

Beyond this, we know comparatively little; there is a gap in current research in terms of our understanding of the specific roles played by formal and informal learning in the small firm, and how these these roles differ in comparison to larger firms. As Nolan and Garavan (2016: 93) observe, in the existing research on HRD there is an “inadequate understanding and accommodation of the unique idiosyncrasies of SMEs, their analytical distinctiveness to larger businesses”, and it is in respect of this gap that the paper aims to make a contribution. Similarly, some researchers (e.g. Edwards, 2010) have asked whether, with their typically more limited resources and less developed management structures, smaller firms might represent a different, less formal and less structured kind of workplace learning environment to the often-assumed, standard ‘textbook’ paradigms based on larger organisations. Contingency theories have echoed this by pointing out that firm size is an important variable in HRD, as the fundamentally structural and functional characteristics of small and large firms lead to very different learning experiences and process (e.g. Kuchinke, 2019).

Alongside this, newer ‘sociomaterial’ perspectives on workplace learning (e.g. Fenwick, 2010) suggest that material artefacts such as standard operating procedures constitute fundamental, if neglected elements in the workplace learning of employees. Yet, we know that these are less prevalent in small firms. So, in the absence of extensive, formal HRD structures, does less learning occur in the small business, or do informal learning practices fill the gap? The aim of this paper is to address this question, and to ask how the learning environment of the small firm – that is, the inter-relationship of formal and informal learning opportunities – differs from that of its larger counterpart, and how it changes as the size of the firm increases. It also asks how different employees perceive and respond differently to the learning opportunities they encounter in the workplace (e.g. Billett, 2001).

The paper addresses these questions through a qualitative, comparative study of six restaurants of varying sizes. Specifically, the focus falls upon the workplace learning of waiting staff within these restaurants. Restaurants (the largest sub-sector of the hospitality industry) were chosen, as one of the UK’s major employers, encompassing more than 800,000 workers (People 1<sup>st</sup> 2015). Given the volume of employment in this sector, and its comparatively high levels of reported skills shortages (The Edge Foundation, 2019), extending our understanding of how learning occurs within these workplaces is important in the context of skill formation at the national level. Furthermore, with small firms dominating the hospitality industry (Nachmias et al. 2014), the question of firm size and its impact on the learning environment becomes still more pertinent. Waiting staff were chosen as the primary focus within restaurants, against a background of debate regarding the levels of skill required in such jobs. While many commentators have described such work as essentially low-skilled (e.g. Lloyd and Payne, 2010), others have challenged this, observing that such work actually demands complex

“articulation skills” that combine “cognitive, technical and time management” capabilities that are often ignored or downplayed (e.g. Gatta et al., 2009: 977). Others have highlighted the heightened importance and incidence of informal learning in waiting work (e.g. Cornier-MacBurnie 2010). Thus, the question of how skills are developed in and through waiting work remains a pertinent one; as Baum (2006) observes, we have only a partial understanding of how learning occurs in such work. This, there is a need for further work in this area.

### **Firm size and workplace learning**

Given that formal management structures and practices tend to scale up with firm size (e.g. Mayson and Barrett, 2006; Marlow et al., 2010), it is perhaps unsurprising that research on HRD paints a similar, if less complete picture. These studies (e.g. Bishop, 2012; Susomrith et al., 2019; Mustafa and Elliott, 2019) suggest that smaller firms typically rely more on processes of informal and incidental learning, and that levels of formal training, while relatively low in most small businesses, increase with firm size. For example, Ashton et al. (2008) point out that most small firms lack the formal HRD infrastructure more commonly seen in larger firms (e.g. specialist HRD staff, training budgets, documented learning and development plans etc). As such, the process of developing employees in smaller businesses is generally seen as an activity that occurs in a largely *informal* fashion, through the process of work itself. In defining and illustrating these informal learning processes more specifically, Eraut (2007) identifies a range of ‘work processes’ and ‘learning activities’, through which such learning can occur. These include:

- Problem solving
- Trying things out
- Tackling challenging tasks and roles
- Asking questions
- Getting information
- Listening and observing
- Reflecting
- Giving and receiving feedback

It is through such informal processes, which typically emerge incidentally out of normal work practices, that learning is more likely to occur within the small firm. So, for example, Coetzer et al (2017) emphasise how informal learning in the small firm is shaped less by formalised HRD strategies and practices, and more by contextual influences such as ‘job characteristics’ (e.g. how much autonomy or skill variety the employee has in their work) and ‘relational characteristics’ (e.g. whether workplace interactions with colleagues and managers support or inhibit learning). Very similar observations are made by Csillag et al (2019), who highlight the important role of learning through networking activities in small firms. Formal, structured ‘training’ on the other hand, as an activity separate from work itself, is more unusual<sup>1</sup>.

In understanding the ways in which learning takes on a more formal character in larger firms, there are illuminating insights to be drawn from the sociomaterial perspective on workplace learning (e.g. Fenwick, 2010; Hopwood, 2013). This perspective helps us to conceptualise different learning environments in terms of their formality and informality, and how those environments change as

organisational structure and formality increases. In particular, the sociomaterial perspective highlights the role of non-human elements such as artefacts, documents, technologies and bureaucracy. For example, Fenwick et al. (2012: 6-7) illustrate how “tools, technologies, bodies, actions and objects... produce and sustain practices, often in ways either overlooked by humans, or assumed to be controlled by humans.” So, material elements such as standard operating procedures, online knowledge repositories and documented training programmes become “fixed and durable” in workplaces over time (Fenwick 2010: 114) and come to define the spaces (or lack thereof) within which learning occurs. They gradually take on a ‘life of their own’, coming to shape the way that managers and employees think about learning and skill formation; they therefore play an expanding role in defining what is learned and how it is learned.

In turn, this encroaching process of formalisation may have the effect of reducing the scope for individuals to exercise their own discretion and agency in shaping what, and how, they learn at work. Researchers have become increasingly interested in how different individuals approach learning differently, and how they are shaped in their learning orientations and behaviours by their previous working and learning experiences. For example, Hodkinson et al. (2008) illuminate the ways in which individuals display different preferences and attitudes when responding to workplace learning opportunities. Different individuals, they observe, have different prior knowledge, different educational experiences and different backgrounds, and this leads them to interpret and react to learning opportunities in different ways (see also Clark et al. 2011; Poortman et al., 2011). For example, some may gravitate more towards formal, structured learning activities, while others may feel more at home learning informally through practice. Their engagement with the learning opportunity – and even perhaps their ability to recognise it as such – may accordingly be affected. Billett (2001: 68) refers to this interaction between the individual’s preferences and their learning environment as ‘co-participation’, in the sense that the individual and the workplace environment are both involved in shaping what, and how, learning occurs. We know little about how this co-participation might change as the firm grows and the material elements of the workplace learning environment expand, and what implications this has for the role of individual choice and agency in the learning process.

In seeking to embed the above discussions in the empirical context of this paper, the following section explores workplace learning issues within the hospitality sector.

### **Workplace Learning in the Hospitality Sector**

Research on workplace learning in hospitality is relatively sparse, but some studies have suggested that ‘informal’, on-the-job learning plays a heightened role, particularly in the restaurant sector. This is often attributed to the unusual temporal patterns and pressures of restaurant work (Cornier-MacBurnie 2010), the durability of on-the-job approaches to employee development in restaurants (James and Hayward, 2004) and the importance placed by employers on practical, context-specific capabilities, such as customer service, and social and presentational skills (Lundberg and Mossberg 2008).

With learning at and through work seemingly playing such a key role in the restaurant sector, the nature of the working environment of the restaurant becomes particularly important. Again, there is

not an extensive research literature in this area, but James (2006), referring specifically to the workplace learning of chefs, attempts to delineate the key characteristics of the restaurant working environment. In particular, she emphasises the *temporal* dimension of the restaurant environment, which is normally characterised by extremely busy peaks at service times, interspersed with quieter periods in between (see also Cornier-MacBurnie 2010). Daily routines and work flows become organised around these temporal ebbs and flows, with preparation work taking place in the troughs, before and after the peaks of intense service periods. James (2006) observes that, through repeated practice, workers learn these routines, and internalise this knowledge through repetition so that it can be deployed almost automatically during busy periods, when there is little time for explicit contemplation.

The picture of the restaurant that emerges is one where learning opportunities may be both constrained and enabled by the temporal patterns and routines of the workplace. For example, while the intensity of service periods may, in Eraut's (2007) terms, promote learning opportunities through work processes that entail 'challenging tasks' and the need to solve problems under pressure, it may constrain others by limiting the time available for dedicated 'learning activities' such as reflection, asking questions and seeking feedback. What is less clear is whether this environment changes as firm size increases. Furthermore, some research in the hospitality sector has indicated that material elements such as compulsory service scripts, corporate branding and official presentational standards do play an important role in defining what and how employees learn (e.g. James, 2006; Dowling, 2007), but there has been little systematic or explicit consideration of whether or how this varies according to firm size, or how it interacts with the more informal aspects of learning outlined above.

The foregoing discussion has outlined a number of under-developed areas in the existing literature on firm size and HRD. In particular, while we know that levels of formal training increase as firm size increases, we know less about how the wider workplace learning environment (including informal learning processes) also changes. This is a particularly pertinent question in sectors such as hospitality, where informal learning seems to take on a particular importance. We also know little about how the expansion of formality as the firm grows affects the role of individual choice and agency in shaping HRD. This paper aims to address these gaps by investigating the ways in which firm size affects workplace learning environment, focusing particularly on the experiences of waiting staff in restaurants. It draws on the insights of sociomaterial perspectives to conceptualise 'learning environments' as comprising both human and material elements that interact with each other, and considers whether the material elements come to dominate as the firm grows.

## **Methods**

In order to obtain a fine-grained understanding of the varying workplace learning environments and experiences of waiting staff in different-sized firms, a comparative, qualitative approach was used. Six restaurants were purposively selected as research sites, identified via a targeted web search and company information available online at the hoovers.com database; two small businesses (fewer than 50 employees), two medium-sized firms (50-249 employees), and two larger businesses (250+ employees). This was to allow comparisons between firms of different sizes. At the national level, small, independent firms dominate the hospitality sector numerically; around 98% of all hospitality firms are small, with approximately 86% are classed as 'micro firms' (i.e. employing fewer than 10

people). Small firms account for just under half of all those who work within the sector. A similar proportion are employed within larger firms (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011).

The six firms in this study were selected to ensure that, apart from their size, they were similar in terms of the nature of the cuisine they offered (all offered cuisine that was broadly European in character), within similar price ranges, and geographically proximate (all were located in central England). All of the small and medium-sized firms were independently owned restaurants, while the two larger firms were corporate chains with restaurants across the UK (one restaurant was visited in each of these cases).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thirty-two respondents were interviewed in total, with a minimum of four in each restaurant, including at least three waiting staff and one manager. The managers were interviewed in order to provide an overview of HRD activities, policies and processes within the firm, while the waiting staff (suggested for interview by the managers) were interviewed in order to provide an insight into their learning experiences both at work and elsewhere, and their perceptions of (and responses to) learning opportunities provided by their employer. Full details regarding the sample can be found in Table 1. All company and individual names have been changed to protect anonymity.

The fieldwork process began in each firm with an interview with the manager. Managers provided information about the firm's activities and practices in relation to employee development, and were also able to provide access to relevant organisational documentation in relation to HRD (e.g. training plans, or written operating procedures regarding orders of service), which helped to inform the questioning of employees in the next stage of data collection. Access to employees was sought via managers, who were asked to suggest potential interviews from among the waiting staff. These staff were then approached by the researcher and asked if they would be willing to participate in the research. The interviews (for both managers and waiting staff) lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and the interview template used with waiting staff can be found in Appendix 1. While the semi-structured nature of the interviews did afford some opportunity for respondents to discuss learning in a broader sense (e.g. innovation or improvement in work processes), questioning in the interviews focused mainly on the development and acquisition of job-related skills and knowledge through work – and this is primarily what the findings presented in the following sections concentrate on.

With regard to data analysis, an initial set of analytical categories was developed, based on the literature reviewed above. Firstly, evidence of *informal learning* – and its different manifestations in small, medium-sized and large firms – was sought, using Eraut's (2007) typology of work processes and learning activities (discussed above). Alongside this, categories were developed relating to the extent to which the working and learning environment was characterised by *formality* – i.e. material elements such as explicit HRD systems, policies, budgets and artefacts. Finally, the individual *preferences* of respondents was also a key focus, and in this respect individual preferences for formal or informal learning, and the extent of their engagement with those learning opportunities were used as analytical categories. The data, in the form of full interview transcripts, were analysed against these categories and pertinent extracts matched against them, in line with a qualitative content analysis approach, as outlined for example by Schreier (2013). As Schreier notes however, "a part of the categories should always be data-driven. This is to make sure that the categories match the data – or, to put it differently, that the coding frame provides a valid description of the material." (2013: 171).

As such, the analytical categories remained flexible and were adapted, during the data collection process, in light of the emerging data and initial analysis.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

Company profile	Respondents interviewed
<u>Small firm 1: Giovanni's</u> 12 employees	Manager (Female, 37) Three waiting staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male (age 21)</li> <li>• Female (age 24)</li> <li>• Female (age 30)</li> </ul>
<u>Small firm 2: Jo's Place</u> 16 employees	Owner-Manager (Female, 48) Four waiting staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female (age 19)</li> <li>• Male (age 21)</li> <li>• Female (age 26)</li> <li>• Male (age 29)</li> </ul>
<u>Medium firm 1: Eastern Edge</u> 52 employees	Owner-Manager (Male, 50) Four waiting staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female (age 26)</li> <li>• Male (age 27)</li> <li>• Female (age 30)</li> <li>• Female (age 45)</li> </ul>
<u>Medium firm 2: Five Seasons</u> 61 employees	Owner-Manager (Female, 45) Four waiting staff: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male (age 20)</li> <li>• Female (age 25)</li> <li>• Female (age 26)</li> <li>• Female (age 39)</li> </ul>
<u>Large firm 1: Romolo</u> More than 1000 employees in chain, 31 in restaurant	Restaurant Manager (Female, 36) Five waiting staff (all at the same restaurant) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female (age 21)</li> <li>• Female (age 21)</li> <li>• Male (age 23)</li> <li>• Female (age 29)</li> <li>• Male (age 31)</li> </ul>
<u>Large firm 2: Aspirita</u> More than 1000 employees in chain, 40 in restaurant	Restaurant Manager (Male, 39) Six waiting staff (all at the same restaurant) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female (age 20)</li> <li>• Female (age 22)</li> <li>• Male (age 22)</li> <li>• Female (age 26)</li> <li>• Male (age 30)</li> <li>• Female (age 35)</li> </ul>

## Findings

This section presents the findings that illustrate the different learning environments observed in the different-sized firms. Accordingly, a three-part structure is adopted, with one part for each type of firm. Firstly, the two large firms are examined, followed by the small firms so that the contrasts between large and small can be seen in clear relief. Then, the findings from the medium-sized firms are presented in order to illustrate the intermediate position.

### *The Large Firms: Romolo and Aspirita*

Both of the large firms operated multiple branches across the UK, and their competitive strategies emphasised a high level of standardisation and predictability between these restaurants – and within each restaurant over time. In order to ensure this consistency, they each enforced an array of standard operating procedures (SOPs), orders of service, uniforms and other artefacts and structures that formed the basis of workplace organisation and, hence, the context for learning. Both firms had, for example, developed formal training programmes for all new staff, which specified in detail the knowledge to be acquired (e.g. when and how to serve dishes to customers, presentational standards etc). As the manager at Aspirita explained:

Jane: When you join us, you have all your training again. So when you come as a waiter or a bartender, you get trained for about two weeks and the senior waiter is given direct responsibility for this. Whether you've been trained or not by another company, we'll train you to be how we want you to be, because we'd like everyone's service to be the same. The customer experience must be the same.

(Restaurant Manager, Romolo)

Learning how the company 'wants you to be' was a theme raised frequently by respondents at both large firms. Both had invested considerable resources in ensuring that this desired level of standardisation was realised. For example, senior restaurant staff who had been given responsibility for training new employees, were themselves required to complete 'Train the Trainer' courses. They were also given financial incentives to take on the role. Furthermore, both firms had created intranet sites accessible to all staff, which contained updates to menus and SOPs, and both organisations had established centralised corporate training facilities for their senior waiting staff and managers. All of this reflected a degree of investment and structure within their HRD activities which, as will be seen, stands in marked contrast to the medium-sized and (especially) the smaller firms.

At both large firms, the initial training of waiting staff followed a structure and format set out in written guidelines (called training 'manuals' or 'packs'). All new starters were required to work through these guidelines, under the supervision of a manager or senior member of waiting staff:

James: There's loads of paperwork. When you start with the company you get a massive folder... For whatever section you're working on, whether it's the kitchen, the bar, you get four folders. So for example one's about the health and safety for that part. Your seven steps of service if you're on the floor. All the specifications to all the dishes. It's a huge pack... And

your training supervisor makes you work through it. Then you sit a test, like a questionnaire, to show that you know it.

(Waiter, Aspirita)

Clearly, the training pack constituted an important material artefact in the learning environment of new waiting staff. It dictated not only what they needed to learn, but also in what order. In so doing, it reduced the scope for employees to draw on their own preferences in determining the content and direction of their learning:

Gemma: Everybody has to go through the initial training. If you're front-of-house, it will be the same broad training across all of the front-of-house areas. Bar, Deli, waiting. So everyone has to do that, there's not much room for varying it [or specialising]. What you learn, how you learn it, it's all there in the pack... it's all laid out in the documents.

(Waitress, Aspirita)

Thus, in terms of co-participation, individual agency became subordinated to the structure imposed by the standardised training programmes of these two larger firms.

It is also important to note the temporal dimension of the learning environments at these two larger firms. Echoing James (2006), time to engage in reflective learning was, to an extent, limited and dictated by the rhythms of the working day:

Esther: Initial training happens during and in between service. So you start by shadowing... and then you sit down on a one-to-one and go through the packs. 'Right. These are the steps of service. Obviously you can see me doing them. So now you're going to join in.' This happens in the cracks in service. If you get five minutes we'd sit down and go over the pack, the newbie can ask questions... It's tricky, because in busy restaurants the day's so intense from beginning to end. But the manager or supervisor can usually open up that time, find those cracks, get other staff to cover.

(Waitress and training supervisor, Romolo)

The term 'cracks' is illustrative here; it was used by several respondents across the sample to describe the temporal spaces in which new employees could engage in reflection and ask questions or receive feedback from more experienced staff. Crucially, while these were indeed limited and constrained by busy service periods, managers and supervisors still had some scope to marshal resources to open up the 'cracks' for learning. As detailed below, this is a key difference between the learning environments found in the large firms in the study, and those found in the smaller firms.

#### *The Small Firms: Giovanni's and Jo's Place*

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the two smaller restaurants was that they explicitly adopted competitive strategies that rested on a deliberate *rejection* of standardisation. Their aim was not to provide all customers with the same dining experience; rather, they sought to provide a flexible and differentiated service that accommodated varying customer requirements. Waiting staff were an

important part of delivering this differentiation. As a result, there was relatively little in the way of specified or written scripts and service procedures to guide employees in their work, and waiting staff were expected to use greater discretion in their customer interactions.

The owner and manager of Jo's Place summarised this difference when asked about her previous experiences of working for a large, nationwide restaurant chain:

Jo: In a chain, you're governed by procedures and rules and policies that all come from a central point... if you went into any of those restaurants, at any time, the idea is that you would get exactly the same service... There's no personality. There's no tailoring to what people require... Here, our selling point is that we *do* tailor. We do have the tables that want to be left alone. We do have parties upstairs that want this, this and this, and our waiting staff need to learn to tailor everything, use their judgement, because that's how we stand out.

(Owner-manager, Jo's place)

The managers at both of the smaller firms saw helping new employees to develop their own judgement as an important function of their role, and a crucial part of the initial 'training' process. Yet this training was not defined or guided by training packs or a centralised training department; indeed, there was almost nothing in terms of formal learning infrastructure (a finding that echoes previous research on small firms – see Bishop, 2012). As the manager at Giovanni's explained:

Charlotte: I'd hate to have real, formal, straitjacket training and everybody being a robot and "sir" and "madaming" and curtseying... We don't have a training department... it's just me and the senior staff. I do it all on the job while I'm doing other things. We're constantly making little suggestions: "You could offer table three a smaller portion for their son and deduct it", or "we can mix that dish with that dish if they don't like a particular ingredient." It's tricky because there's so little time during service... we just fit it in where we can... Plus they experience, day one, all the front-of-house tasks. Welcoming, serving, bar, telephone. The lot. So they learn fast through that exposure.

(Manager, Giovanni's)

Thus, managers at the two smaller restaurants, due to their more restricted resources, were less able to open the temporal 'cracks' during work time to develop employees. Learning took place almost entirely on-the-job, as the pressures of service allowed, and without any explicit pedagogic systems or artefacts such as training packs. This may, *prima facie*, seem like an environment with fewer learning opportunities. Importantly however, some viewed it much more positively. For example, one waitress not only enjoyed the lack of structure, but opted to exploit it in order to construct new directions for her own learning:

Juliet: It's a baptism of fire when you start. On the first day you just end up doing everything and it's so intense. It's like that for the first few weeks. You do, you watch, you pick up so much. Personally I like it, don't know why... I'm doing a Performing Arts degree, I've always loved performing. So I think I just like the performance aspect... I'm not shy in asking if I don't know something, or want to do something different. So I've even been involved in the kitchen a few times, making starters and things.

(Waitress, Jo's Place)

Others found the lack of guiding structure less positive:

Patrick: I came from [a large restaurant chain]. To be honest I found it a bit easier there. You had your list of tasks, things you needed to do. You had a trainer. You had a bit of time at the end of each day for debrief. I knew what I needed to learn, when I was going to learn it... I like working here, but sometimes I feel like I'm missing important things... And to be honest I'm not looking to stay in waiting for a career, so I'm not going to go out of my way to learn stuff... I won't need to know.

(Waiter, Giovanni's)

Thus, in the smaller restaurants, there were fewer material structures, artefacts and routines to establish the content and form of learning. This had the effect of foregrounding the agency of the individual – both new staff and their managers – to a greater extent than was the case in the larger firms. Some were predisposed to use this space to carve out new and more expansive learning experiences that were simply not permitted by the encroaching material environment of the larger firms. Others, influenced by their previous experiences, expressed a desire for greater structure and direct guidance. We can thus begin to see how processes of co-participation between the material and the human take on different characters in the different environments of the small firm and the large firm. The next section explores the intermediate position between these two; the two medium-sized firms, where structure and flexibility co-existed in an ambiguous and often uneasy relationship.

#### *The Medium-sized Firms: Eastern Edge and Five Seasons*

Both of the medium-sized firms had recently grown from their origins as small businesses, in terms of both headcount and financial turnover. Both were actively seeking to expand beyond their single premises, with their founding owner-managers expressing intentions to open branches in other locations. They were firmly of the view that they were outgrowing their previous, less formal modes of management and, particularly as they opened new restaurants, felt that they would need to ensure consistency in terms of customer experience between branches. Both firms had started to create a range of formal, documented systems to facilitate this.

This was experienced as a difficult process where increasing formality – which they saw as a necessity for an organisation of their size and growth intentions – came into tension with the older, more informal and familiar ways of working and learning, which they associated with being a small, single-site firm:

Claire: If we opened the new place right now, we'd have no idea how to replicate what we have here. It sounds funny, but I realised... we've never recorded any of our processes. All the training is left to the senior waiters to do on the job, as they please, so there's too much variation in how we develop staff and how they work... So to get this to happen, it's really monotonous, because it's all about getting procedures in place so that things happen more consistently. We're trying to have check-lists, orders of service, which are put up on the walls. Our head waiter is developing a training pack for all new staff to make sure there's less

variation in what they do. It goes against the grain because we've always had that flexibility and personality in how we work. And it's worked for us... But it can't work across two, three different restaurants.

(Owner / manager, Five Seasons)

A very similar story emerged at Eastern Edge, which was in the process of setting up a second restaurant. In both cases, the stated aim was to extend the material elements of the organisation – SOPs, checklists, written orders of service, training manuals etc – specifically in order to reduce the scope for discretion, flexibility, and hence variation. That is, to close the material spaces in which individual agency could influence the process and content of learning. And, in both cases, the journey from a largely unstructured small firm approach (of the kind described above in relation to the smaller firms) towards a more bureaucratic and structured 'large firm' approach was fraught with difficulty, as older ways of working and learning proved resistant to formalisation. As one of the waitresses at Eastern Edge noted:

Lisa: We've got these new checklists. [The owner-manager] calls it 'The Knowledge'. He got the head waiter to type out basically everything we do front-of-house in this big glossy folder. What order we serve. What to say when greeting customers. How new staff are supposed to get trained up... It'll help when they set up the new restaurant, but we've all said this... it feels a bit robotic. We like working here because we get to do things our individual way, train up staff on my section my way. But he's really pushing these checklists and before long we'll all be looking the same, doing the same... Less room to put our own stamp on things.

(Waitress, Eastern Edge)

At both firms, the majority of respondents felt uneasy about the encroachment of – as they saw it – a constraining formality as the organisation grew. For example, one respondent, who had previously worked at a large restaurant chain commented that:

Alice: It's starting to feel like my old job. You get trained their way and you have to stick to it, you have no say in what you do or what you get trained in... I came here because it's freer, you feel like you have some say.

(Waitress, Eastern Edge)

There was, however a minority who took an opposing view, and who welcomed the attempted move towards greater formality in work and learning processes. One commented that:

Philippe: It's all a bit too loose at the moment. How well you get trained basically depends on you pushing it all the way yourself, and having a senior waiter who's willing to help... I hoped that the new training packs would help with that, but it's taking ages.

(Waiter, Five Seasons)

Thus, the picture emerging at both of the medium-sized firms was one where established informal patterns of learning and work organisation were proving an inertial influence upon the establishment of greater structure, bureaucratisation and predictability. On the restaurant floor, the material

artefacts, checklists and training packs that had been introduced, co-existed uneasily with the older, informal practices of their small firm background. The process of closing the material spaces was therefore sporadic, and the individual agency of staff and their supervisors still played an important role in shaping their learning.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Previous studies of HRD and firm size have established that rates of formal training are higher in larger firms, and that smaller firms tend to rely more heavily on informal learning. This study adds to this knowledge, by providing an illustration of how the balance between the formal and informal elements of learning can change as firm size increases, and what implications this has for firms and the people who work within them. The incorporation of the sociomaterial perspective helps to provide further insight, by offering a novel and effective way of understanding the importance of material objects (e.g. training manuals, standardised and documented working practices etc.) in shaping workplace learning, and in determining the extent to which individual choice and preference can impact upon learning.

Firstly, the findings extend our understanding (see e.g. Bishop, 2012) of how the increased formality in HRD that generally comes with increased firm size shapes the learning that takes place. So, in the larger restaurants, learning processes were to a large extent dominated and driven by various material elements: artefacts and management systems that had been specifically designed to create uniformity and predictability within employee development processes. Managers and supervisors were able to co-ordinate the resources available to them in order to open up the temporal 'cracks' in the busy restaurant environment to make room for more reflective and discursive learning activities. Managers in the medium-sized firms aspired to such material formality around learning processes, but in reality were often constrained by the legacy of informality inherited from their small firm origins.

In this respect, the study illuminates an under-researched area and makes an important contribution; most previous research has focused on either small or large firms, or on the contrasts between them. Relatively little has been written however, about the ambiguous position occupied by those firms in the intermediate position – particularly those firms that are outgrowing their smaller origins, and are encountering the process of managing the tensions between existing informality and emerging formality in their modes of skill formation. What the findings suggest is that this not a linear or simple process of steady formalisation in their employee development processes, as is often assumed in models of growth (as noted by Marlow et al. 2010). Rather, it can be a much more complex and challenging process than has previously been widely acknowledged. And, moreover, the insight provided by the incorporation of the sociomaterial perspective helps us to foreground the important the shift in emphasis between human and material elements in the process of firm growth. As the firm grows, the institution and expansion of material artefacts (SOPs, training manuals etc) around workplace learning restricts the space in which individual agency can operate. This can be interpreted negatively by both managers and employees as (in their view) it represents a curtailment of their personal autonomy and a shift away from the more flexible and personalised approach previously deemed effective and successful.

In contrast, the smaller firms, with their fewer resources, and competitive strategies founded on differentiation and flexibility, actively eschewed such formality and explicitly relied upon more ad-hoc learning processes that lacked such bureaucratic pre-determination. Consequently, workplace learning was shaped much less by explicit pedagogic structures, and more by the agentic actions of individuals such as managers and the waiters themselves. Importantly however, the findings make a further contribution by indicating that this does not *inevitably* restrict learning opportunities, as has often been assumed (e.g. Jameson 2000). Indeed, with managers encouraging waiters to utilise the higher levels of autonomy and discretion afforded to them, and with the terms and content of training and learning processes far less constrained by a pre-defined structure, learning opportunities were evident – *if* employees were predisposed to exploit them. This final, crucial point highlights the importance of co-participation between opportunity and agency in shaping the workplace learning environment.

The findings also suggest that these processes of co-participation take on different forms in large and smaller firms. In the large firm, material structures, systems and artefacts dominate both work and learning processes, and there are comparatively few gaps between these material elements for human agency to exploit. This helps to ensure standardisation in what and how employees learn, but leaves little room for the individual to shape and determine their own learning. In contrast, in the smaller firm, the ‘cracks’ in the material structure are far greater and the individual therefore has more space in which to direct their own learning, if they are predisposed so to do. So for example, employees who harboured unfavourable recollections of highly structured training systems in previous jobs in large firms, were more likely to value greater flexibility and less guiding structure. This predisposed them towards a more active approach in shaping their own learning. Conversely, employees who preferred greater structure, or who saw little point in extending their hospitality skills as their longer-term career aims lay elsewhere, found it less attractive to “swim in the deep waters” (Taylor et al. 2004: 43) of the unstructured learning environment of the small firm. They thus experienced less benefit as learning ‘opportunities’ were rejected or ignored. Consequently, neither the small firm nor the larger firm can be considered *inherently* superior as a learning environment, as the nature, content and quality of the learning that occurs is contingent upon processes of co-participation.

#### *Limitations and Implications of the Research*

There are of course limitations to the study, which prevent definitive conclusions about the differences between large and small firms from being drawn. For example, the sample is comparatively small, particularly in relation to the larger firms which have multiple branches and employee numbers running into the thousands. Also, only one sector is explored. However, for practitioners, particularly managers in small and growing firms, we can identify two main implications. The first is that small firms who are seeking to pursue a growth strategy, need to engage with the tensions that can emerge between formal and informal HRD structures. These tensions can emerge as formal HRD structures and practices are implemented to ensure consistency between different staff and different branches, and start to encroach on the informal learning spaces and practices that employees may have found valuable. Maintaining these informal spaces while also exploiting the benefits of increased structure and formality is an important task. Secondly, it is important to recognise that an individual’s previous working and learning experiences may affect the way in which

they perceive and engage with the learning opportunities available to them. For example, employees who have previously experienced and been habituated to a more formal learning environment may benefit from additional managerial support in adapting to the less formal environment of the small firm, in which greater self-direction is typically expected and required.

For researchers, future studies of workplace learning could fruitfully seek to incorporate the insights of the sociomaterial approach by focusing on both the human and the material dimensions of workplace learning environments, *and* the interaction between them. For example, there is much scope for longitudinal studies that explore the expansion of formal learning structures and artefacts as firm size increases, and which examine the impact that this expansion has in upon employee learning in terms of prescribing more standardised and uniform learning experiences. In doing so however, they should not neglect the social and historical construction of human agency *beyond* the workplace. As Hodkinson et al. (2008) illustrate, individuals have dispositions and identities that predate the workplace and are conditioned by their social and educational backgrounds. Thus, the enactment of their agency in relation to workplace learning becomes shaped by this history, and will vary accordingly. The factors and processes involved in this shaping are an area in need of exploration through further research. Research is also needed in other sectors – for example in the professions, where there are more established and formal routes of vocational and educational preparation and qualification.

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## Appendix 1

### Restaurant Employee Interview Template

#### 1) Biographical Information

- Age?
- Tenure with the firm?
- What type of secondary school did you attend?
  - At the age of 16, did you stay on in school, or find a job, or something else?
  - So, what prompted you to take that decision? Was it a planned strategy with a goal in mind? Simply 'the next step'?
  - Consider decisions regarding initial education / career, e.g. did you go on to University? Then PROBE:]
    - *Reasons* for decisions; strategies / rationales or just the next thing?
- And why did you apply for this job? [PROBE: stop-gap? Income? Career move?]
- Had you done any relevant training prior to getting this job?

#### 2) The nature of work tasks and (informal) learning

- Could you describe the things or specific tasks that you do *most often* in your job, on an everyday basis? [*show me if appropriate, unless already observed*] → [PROBE range of tasks, interactions with other people, artefacts, *technology*]:
  - How did you learn how to do that / use that? Formal training / picked it up? How? Asked someone? (observation, doing, mentoring) PROBE instances of informal learning (how, when did they occur? From whom, what or what processes did the learning come? Were they useful?)
  - When you first started your job, can you remember if there were any things that you found hard or difficult to get used to? How did you become better at those things?
  - Is there anything you still find difficult about the job?
  - Would you say that your job is varied, or does it concentrate only on a few things?
  - Who would you say you generally interact with at work most on a daily basis? For what purposes do you interact with them? What do those interactions normally consist of?
  - And who do you ask (if anyone) if you're not sure about how to do something, or if you need more information about something?
- Would you say that you help others to learn in the workplace? How? Do you share knowledge, talk about work and how to do things better?
- In general, would you say that you feel encouraged and supported to learn and pick up new things by your organisation?
  - PROBE: role of managers, and managerial structure. Cultural attitudes, structural incentives?

### 3) Experiences of formal training; HRD structures

- How much *formal* off the job training (or education) have you done since you joined the firm? Courses, seminars, workshops, training days, induction and so on? [If none, PROBE: Have you considered doing any, or been asked to do any? What happened? Then go to next section]
- In general, what process triggers that training? Is it normally organisational requirements – something you're told to do – or something you're encouraged to do, or more of a proactive choice on your part? A mix of these?
  - PROBE the specific process (e.g. suggestions from manager).
- Pick one episode of training that you went through that stands out in your mind as important. So what was the reason for you doing that training? How did you come to be involved in that? PROBE the motivations and processes, and outcomes:
- Are there any other instances of training that stand out in your mind for any particular reason?
- Overall, would you say that you have found the formal training you've done to be useful to you in your work and your own performance?
  - Do you prefer to learn formally, or are you the kind of person who just likes to pick things up themselves? Which do you think is most helpful to you in your work?
  - Would you like to do more training? Do you think you need more training? If so, for what?

**END**

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<sup>i</sup> Some writers have seen this informality as a positive feature of the small firm, as it may allow for more flexible and responsive learning (e.g. Hill and Stewart, 2000; Kortsch et al., 2019), while others argue that it risks failing to guarantee that workers are adequately skilled or qualified (e.g. Leach 2010; Otoo and Mishra, 2018).