

Review Article



Informal workplace learning in Cambodia's sub-national administrations: A conceptual and historical review

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Abstract

Informal workplace learning (IWL) is increasingly recognized as a critical mechanism for professional development and organizational adaptability. However, its role in public-sector governance, particularly in developing and transitional contexts, including Cambodia, remains insufficiently examined. Using an integrative conceptual-historical review approach, this article synthesizes scholarly literature, policy frameworks, institutional documents, and historical sources to examine how IWL has evolved and continues to operate within Cambodia's sub-national administrations. Drawing on established theories of workplace learning and evidence from Cambodia's administrative history and decentralization reforms, the review identifies key patterns of learning through mentoring, peer exchange, experiential adaptation, and social interaction. The synthesis points out that informal workplace learning practices are deeply embedded in Cambodia's cultural and institutional traditions and continue to reinforce governance performance despite the expansion of formal training systems. By situating IWL at the intersection of learning theory, public administration, and decentralized governance, this review suggests a context-sensitive framework for understanding capacity development in transitional administrative systems and underscores the importance of recognizing informal workplace learning within national civil-service development strategies.

Keywords: Informal workplace learning; public-sector governance; decentralization reform; sub-national administration; capacity development; Cambodia

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Introduction

Informal workplace learning (IWL), defined as learning that occurs outside formally structured educational programs and emerges through everyday work activities, interaction, and reflection (Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 1992), is increasingly recognized as an important mechanism for professional development and organizational performance. Recent studies have shown that IWL remains central to employee adaptability, performance, and continuous skills development in changing work environments (Cerasoli et al., 2018; De Grip, 2024; Smet et al., 2022). Within public-sector organizations, officials continuously acquire knowledge and skills through problem-solving, collaboration, observation, and reflective practice embedded in routine work activities (Billett, 2001; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). Research has also consistently demonstrated that such learning contributes substantially to skill development, knowledge application, and organizational adaptability (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 1992). Consequently, understanding how informal workplace learning occurs within workplace settings has become increasingly important for strengthening institutional effectiveness and responsiveness to change.

In public-sector governance, learning is closely shaped by administrative culture, social relationships, and institutional norms that influence how officials acquire, share, and apply knowledge in practice (Grindle, 1997; Hughes, 2009). Nevertheless, capacity-development efforts have traditionally emphasized formal training and donor-supported programs, often overlooking the informal and tacit learning processes embedded in everyday work environments (Andrews et al., 2017; Eraut, 2004). Existing evidence suggests that formal training alone rarely produces sustained behavioral change when learning is not reinforced through workplace practice (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Kyndt & Baert, 2013). Public-sector studies similarly emphasize that civil-service capacity development depends not only on formal training provision but also on continuous workplace learning, managerial support, feedback, and opportunities to apply skills in practice (OECD, 2023, 2024). This persistent gap between training participation and workplace performance underscores the need to better understand how IWL complements formal capacity-development systems and contributes to organizational effectiveness. Cambodia's civil service has undergone substantial transformation through decentralization and deconcentration reforms, particularly following the Law on

Administrative Management of Commune/Sangkat ([Royal Government of Cambodia \[RGC\], 2001](#)), the Law on Administrative Management of Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts, and Khans ([RGC, 2008](#)), and the National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development ([National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development \[NCDD\], 2010, 2021](#)). These reforms seek to establish capable, accountable, and responsive sub-national administrations while improving public-service delivery and the quality of life of local residents ([NCDD, 2005, 2021](#)). Despite these institutional advances, local officials continue to rely heavily on informal mechanisms such as peer guidance, observation, mentoring, and experiential adaptation to perform their responsibilities effectively ([Öjendal & Sedara, 2006](#)). Although structured training opportunities have expanded through public-sector institutions, including the National School of Local Administration (NASLA) ([RGC, 2021](#)), their reach remains limited and often disconnected from workplace realities. Consequently, much of the practical competence required for effective sub-national administration continues to develop through informal workplace learning embedded in daily work interactions.

The existing studies related to IWL have largely emerged from corporate, industrial, and higher-education settings, with comparatively limited attention devoted to public-sector organizations in developing and transitional contexts ([Milligan et al., 2014; Smet et al., 2022](#)). In Southeast Asian public-administration scholarship, research has primarily focused on decentralization reforms, governance arrangements, and institutional change rather than the micro-level learning processes through which civil servants acquire, share, and apply knowledge in everyday administrative practice ([Antlöv, 2003; Öjendal & Sedara, 2006; Painter, 2008](#)). As a result, the role of IWL within Cambodia's sub-national administrations remains insufficiently understood despite its apparent significance for administrative performance and reform implementation.

Against this background, this review synthesizes historical, conceptual, and policy-oriented scholarship to examine how IWL has evolved and continues to operate within Cambodia's sub-national administrations. Specifically, it seeks to (1) trace the historical and cultural roots of informal workplace learning within Cambodia's administrative traditions and (2) examine how existing scholarship and institutional evidence conceptualize the continuing relevance of informal workplace learning within Cambodia's decentralization reforms. The review

argues that IWL constitutes a central yet under-documented mechanism through which sub-national civil servants in Cambodia develop administrative competence and adapt decentralization reforms in practice. The review is guided by the following question: How does the literature explain the role of IWL in shaping the performance and adaptability of Cambodia's sub-national civil service?

This article adopts an integrative conceptual-historical review approach (Jabareen, 2009; Snyder, 2019) that draws upon scholarly literature, legal and policy frameworks, institutional documents, and historical sources relevant to IWL and sub-national administration in Cambodia. Relevant studies and documents were identified through searches of Google Scholar and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) using combinations of keywords, including "informal workplace learning," "workplace learning," "public administration," "civil service learning," "decentralization," "sub-national administration," and "Cambodia." Additional policy documents, legislation, governance reports, and institutional publications were identified through government websites and organizational repositories. Sources were selected based on their relevance to IWL, public-sector capacity development, decentralization reform, and Cambodia's administrative development, whereas sources unrelated to workplace learning or public-sector administration were excluded. The remainder of the article reviews the conceptual foundations of IWL, examines informal workplace learning in governance and public-sector contexts, explores the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of informal workplace learning in Cambodia's sub-national administrations, discusses policy implications, and concludes with key contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Conceptual foundations of informal workplace learning

Within the workplace-learning literature, informal workplace learning or IWL is distinguished from formal learning, which is institutionally designed, guided by prescribed objectives, and typically assessed, and from incidental learning, which occurs unintentionally during task performance (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). In contrast, IWL is typically intentional, self-directed, and embedded in everyday work activities, where individuals develop knowledge and professional judgment through participation, observation, interaction, and reflection while addressing work-related challenges (Billett, 2001; Ellström, 2011; Eraut, 2004). More recent scholarship continues to conceptualize IWL as a

socially situated and practice-based process shaped by work design, learner agency, feedback, and interaction with colleagues and supervisors (De Grip, 2024; Graßmann et al., 2023; Smet et al., 2022). The conceptualization of IWL has been shaped by influential workplace-learning perspectives that view learning as an experiential, socially situated, and practice-based process occurring within everyday work environments (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 1992), providing the theoretical foundation for understanding how workplace conditions influence opportunities for learning and professional development.

The theoretical perspectives on IWL converge on the view that learning is a continuous, experience-based process embedded in social and organizational contexts. Marsick and Watkins (1992, 2001) conceptualized informal and incidental learning as experiential processes through which individuals construct meaning through cycles of action and reflection. Extending this perspective, Billett (2001, 2004) conceptualized workplace learning as a learning environment characterized by varying degrees of affordances, referring to the opportunities and constraints that shape participation, guidance, and collaboration. Ellström (2011) similarly emphasized that informal workplace learning depends on the dynamic balance between individual initiatives and organizational support. From these perspectives, workplace learning is shaped by the interaction between learner agency and structural conditions, including leadership practices, organizational culture, and peer relationships. Complementing these views, Eraut (2004) underscored the importance of feedback, challenge, and support as critical enablers of professional learning in everyday work.

Within these theoretical traditions, IWL is commonly expressed through mechanisms such as self-directed learning, mentoring, peer learning, and reflection-in-action (Billett, 2004; Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2001). More recent studies emphasize the role of reverse mentoring in facilitating intergenerational knowledge exchange, particularly in contexts where younger employees support senior colleagues in developing digital and innovative competencies (Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Murphy, 2012). However, the effectiveness of these learning mechanisms is highly contingent on organizational contexts. Furthermore, research has consistently identified autonomy, social support, feedback, workload, and organizational culture as key determinants

influencing the extent and quality of IWL (Ellström, 2011; Kyndt & Baert, 2013; Kyndt et al., 2014). Thus, supportive environments that foster autonomy and trust tend to encourage experimentation, feedback-seeking, and knowledge sharing, whereas excessive workloads and rigid hierarchies constrain reflection and motivation (Ellström, 2011; Eraut, 2004; Kyndt & Baert, 2013).

Previous studies have consistently conceptualized IWL as a socially embedded and practice-driven process that complements formal instruction by enabling continuous adaptation, innovation, and performance improvement (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 1992). Rather than operating in isolation, IWL unfolds across individual, relational, and organizational levels, integrating motivation, collaboration, and institutional norms into a coherent process of workplace learning and professional development (Ellström, 2011; Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Informal workplace learning in governance and public-sector contexts

Although IWL has been extensively examined in corporate and educational settings, the study about its role within public administration and governance remains relatively limited (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Manuti et al., 2015). Nevertheless, research on workplace learning and organizational practice suggests that bureaucratic organizations, despite their hierarchical structures and procedural formality, rely heavily on informal exchanges to manage complexity, coordinate action, and sustain effective service delivery (Billett, 2004; Eraut, 2011). In administrative practice, informal workplace learning enables civil servants to interpret policy directives, navigate administrative ambiguity, and adapt procedures to local institutional and resource constraints, particularly where formal training or operational guidance is limited (Eraut, 2004; Hughes, 2009; Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

In developing and decentralizing countries, IWL assumes particular importance when authority is devolved more rapidly than formal administrative capacity can be developed. Research on governance reform in Southeast Asian countries suggests that the experiential learning, peer mentoring, and professional networking often compensate for institutional gaps during such transitions (Antlöv, 2003; Painter, 2008). For instance, the “big-bang” decentralization of 2001 in Indonesia required district officials to acquire planning and budgeting competencies largely through peer exchanges, informal consultation, and learning that supports non-governmental organizations, as formal civil-service training

lagged behind newly assigned responsibilities ([Antlöv, 2003](#); [Hofman & Kaiser, 2004](#)). In Vietnam, the decentralization and market-oriented reforms similarly placed local cadres in contexts characterized by policy ambiguity and irregular procedural guidance, prompting them to develop administrative competence through on-the-job practice, informal problem-solving, and the adaptation of central directives to local conditions ([Painter, 2008](#); [Vasavakul, 2014](#)). Additionally, in the Philippines, the inter-local government networks, mayors' leagues, and professional associations functioned as informal arenas for policy learning, peer support, and the diffusion of innovative local governance practices, particularly in the context of devolved service delivery and local autonomy reforms ([Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011](#); [Capuno, 2011](#)). Thus, these cases illustrate how learning through social practice and adaptive problem-solving becomes central to the functioning of decentralized governance systems.

Cambodia's experience reflects similar regional changing aspects. Historical scholarship underscores that during the post-conflict reconstruction period of the 1980s, many public officials lacking formal qualifications developed administrative skills through mentorship, imitation, and trial-and-error learning ([Ayres, 2000](#); [Slocumb, 2010](#)). Even following the expansion of structured training systems, sub-national officials have continued to rely on informal guidance, peer collaboration, and reflective practice to implement decentralization mandates ([NCDD, 2021](#); [Öjendal & Sedara, 2006](#)). Although these informal processes are rarely foregrounded in formal policy frameworks, the existing research has consistently portrayed them as essential foundations for adaptive governance and effective local problem-solving ([Andrews et al., 2017](#); [Billett, 2001](#); [Eraut, 2004](#)). Among transitional bureaucracies, IWL functions as a critical adaptive mechanism in transitional bureaucracies, supporting institutional continuity and incremental innovation when formal training systems are limited, uneven, or externally driven ([Andrews et al., 2017](#); [Eraut, 2004](#); [Painter, 2008](#)). At the same time, these learning practices reflect enduring cultural orientations toward collective learning, respect for hierarchy, and pragmatic problem-solving that characterize many Southeast Asian administrative systems ([Andaya & Andaya, 2015](#); [Hughes, 2009](#)). Despite this recognition, an analytical divide remains between workplace-learning research, which tends to emphasize cognitive, social, and organizational processes, and governance scholarship, which focuses primarily on institutional design and political structures ([Billett, 2001](#); [Peters, 2011](#)). Therefore, bridging these domains requires a multi-level analytical

perspective that explicitly connects individual agency, organizational learning environments, and institutional contexts of governance reform (Ellström, 2011; Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Building on the preceding theoretical, governance, and historical discussions, this article suggests that IWL operates across interrelated levels within public administration. At the individual level, learning is shaped by motivation, reflection, and proactive engagement in work-related problem-solving (Billett, 2001; Ellström, 2001; Eraut, 2004). At the organizational level, workplace culture, leadership practices, and peer interaction provide the social infrastructure that enables or constrains learning (Billett, 2001; Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). At the national level, national policies, decentralization frameworks, and historical legacies shape the broader incentive structures and administrative conditions under which learning occurs (North, 1990; Smoke, 2015).

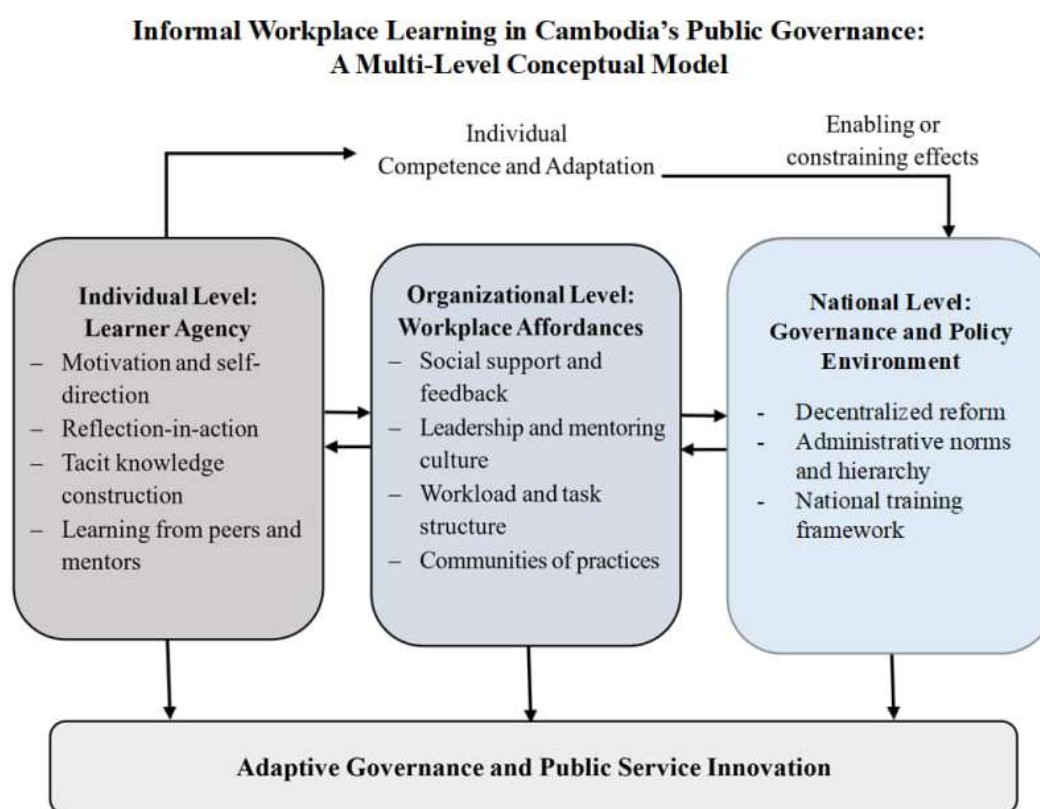


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of informal workplace learning in Cambodia's public governance

Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature

To capture these interconnections, this review synthesizes a multi-level conceptual framework of IWL in Cambodia's public governance (Figure 1). The framework links micro-level learner agency, meso-level organizational affordances, and macro-level national structures, illustrating how adaptive governance capacity and public service innovation emerge through their dynamic interaction. It suggests an analytical lens for organizing and interpreting the literature discussed in subsequent sections, enabling a coherent examination of informal workplace learning across historical and institutional contexts.

Historical roots of informal workplace learning in Cambodia

The existing historical documents point out that the informal workplace learning in Cambodia has deep foundations that long predate the introduction of modern schooling (Ayres, 2000; Chandler, 2008; Dy, 2004; Hangchuon, 2018; Harris, 2017). For centuries, education was embedded in community and monastic life, closely linking moral cultivation, social order, and governance practices. The Buddhist pagoda (*wat*) functioned as both an educational and civic institution, where monks taught literacy, numeracy, and moral discipline through Pali and Khmer texts (Ayres, 2000; Dy, 2004; Harris, 2017). Beyond basic education, the pagodas also nurtured civic virtues such as respect, diligence, and social harmony, which shaped early norms of public service and leadership (Hangchuon, 2018). In this regard, the learning during this period occurred principally through observation, imitation, and apprenticeship, reflecting forms of situated and experiential learning comparable to what Lave and Wenger (1991) later conceptualized as participation in "communities of practice." Moreover, scholars have argued that these traditions fostered an understanding of administrative competence as emerging from moral development and lived experience rather than from abstract instruction alone (Edwards, 2007; Hangchuon, 2018; Slocomb, 2010).

During the French colonial period (1863–1953), historical analyses indicate the emergence of a dual educational and administrative system in which Western-style bureaucratic education coexisted with local apprenticeship traditions (Chandler, 2008; Hangchuon, 2018). The colonial administration established schools to train clerks and interpreters; however, access was largely confined to urban elites (Chandler, 2008; Clayton, 1995; Dy, 2004). As a result, many Cambodian officials continued to acquire administrative skills informally by observing Vietnamese and French administrators and adapting procedures through daily practice (Chandler, 2008; Clayton, 1995). This dual structure

produced a small, formally educated elite alongside a broader cadre of locally trained officials who relied heavily on experiential adaptation and peer mentoring. Even after independence, formal education expanded gradually, and bureaucratic skill formation continued to depend largely on workplace practice and collegial guidance (Ayres, 2000; Hangchuon, 2018). Consequently, the administrative knowledge in Cambodia seems to be acquired through formal instruction along with practical workplace experience, and the learning often occurs through observation, participation, and interaction with more experienced officials. Thus, this pattern reflects forms of experiential and workplace learning that have been identified in the broader literature on learning in workplace contexts (Ayres, 2000; Billett, 2001; Chandler, 2008; Eraut, 2004).

The socialist reconstruction period (1979–1993) further entrenched informal workplace learning as a central mechanism of institutional recovery (Chandler, 2008). Following the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime, during which most educated professionals were killed or displaced, the reconstituted government faced an acute shortage of trained personnel (Clayton, 1998; Dy, 2007; Gottesman, 2003). Historical studies describe how, under these conditions, the public officials developed administrative competence through improvisation, peer exchange, and trial-and-error problem-solving (Chandler, 2008; Dy, 2007; Gottesman, 2003). Senior cadres mentored younger recruits in essential functions such as record keeping, taxation, and dispute mediation, often in the absence of manuals or formal training institutions (Chandler, 2008; Gottesman, 2003). These necessity-driven learning practices align with conceptualizations of informal workplace learning as emerging from unplanned experience and practical problem-solving (Marsick & Watkins, 1992). Moreover, scholars suggest that the adaptive practices of this period fostered a culture of collective resilience that has continued to influence governance behavior in subsequent reform eras (Gottesman, 2003; Hughes & Un, 2011).

Across these historical stages, a broad progression evolved from monastic apprenticeship to bureaucratic imitation and post-conflict experiential reconstruction (Chandler, 2008; Hangchuon, 2018). Moreover, at all these stages, practice-based learning, observation, and community exchange remained the enduring mechanisms of knowledge transmission, particularly in contexts where formal instructional systems were weak or disrupted (Ayres, 2000; Chandler, 2008). These historical foundations help explain why contemporary

Cambodian public officials often place greater emphasis on interpersonal learning, mentoring, and imitation than on classroom-based instruction, especially within hierarchical administrative settings shaped by long-standing institutional norms (Hughes, 2009; Hughes & Un, 2011; Un, 2019). Informal workplace learning thus appears not merely as a situational response to institutional limitation but as a historically embedded mode of knowing that continues to influence administrative behavior and the implementation of sub-national governance reforms (Gottesman, 2003).

Informal workplace learning in Cambodia's contemporary sub-national governance

IWL remains an important mechanism through which the officials develop professional competence within Cambodia's decentralized administrative system (Hughes, 2009; NCDD, 2021; Öjendal & Sedara, 2006). Although formal training institutions, including NASLA, provide structured capacity-development programs, these programs are most effective when supported by workplace learning environments that enable officials to apply, adapt, and reinforce newly acquired knowledge within sub-national administrative settings (Asian Development Bank, 2018; NCDD, 2021). These workplace learning processes are increasingly important under Cambodia's current public-administration and digital-transformation priorities, particularly the Pentagonal Strategy Phase I and the Cambodia Digital Government Policy 2022–2035 (RGC, 2022, 2023).

Within such environments, the civil servants consolidate and adapt formal knowledge through mentoring and supervision, observation of senior colleagues, peer interaction, feedback, and learning-by-doing, as they navigate local administrative routines, political dynamics, and resource constraints (Gottesman, 2003; Hughes, 2009). These features correspond closely to core dimensions of IWL identified in existing research, including social support, experiential problem-solving, and learning embedded in everyday work practices rather than relying solely on formal instruction (Marsick & Watkins, 1992). Recent public administration and workplace learning literature similarly emphasizes that public organizations need adaptive learning capacity, flexible skills development, and continuous knowledge sharing to respond to increasingly complex policy and service-delivery demands (Fazekas, 2023; OECD, 2023, 2024; Wallo et al., 2024).

Governance studies and administrative reports describe how, at the commune or Sangkat levels, experienced officials routinely mentor newly elected councilors, clerks, and administrative staff. This guidance typically involves practical tasks such as preparing Commune or Sangkat Investment Plans, clarifying budgetary procedures, and engaging citizens and local community organizations (NCDD, 2021; Öjendal & Sedara, 2006). Such mentoring practices reflect principles of experiential and situated learning, in which competence develops based on guided participation in authentic administrative activities (Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Watkins, 1992). The gradual transfer of responsibility from senior to junior staff, documented in governance research (Eng & Ear, 2016; Rohdewohld, 2022), reflects Cambodia's long-standing apprenticeship tradition within public administration.

Peer-to-peer learning further reinforces informal workplace learning processes within sub-national governance. Although formal workshops and peer-exchange forums are often facilitated by training institutions, previous studies indicate that many practice-relevant insights emerge through informal interactions, including field visits, professional networks, and post-training discussions rather than through structured sessions alone (Billett, 2001; Kyndt et al., 2014). Such interactions can foster trust and psychological safety, enabling officials to share candid experiences, acknowledge uncertainty, and exchange context-specific solutions that may not surface in formal settings (Edmondson, 1999). Research on IWL further suggests that these peer-based exchanges support adaptive problem-solving and the contextualization of formal knowledge within everyday work practices (Eraut, 2004). This form of trust-based learning is particularly relevant in decentralized governance environments, where public officials must navigate political sensitivities, resource constraints, and evolving administrative mandates through relational and practice-based modes of learning (Hughes, 2009).

Previous studies have also pointed to the growing importance of reverse mentoring as a dimension of informal workplace learning within public administration. Younger officials, often more proficient with digital tools and communication platforms, support senior colleagues in adopting online systems and financial-management software, whereas the senior officials contribute institutional experience and procedural judgment (Crouse et al., 2011; Doornbos et al., 2008; Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Murphy, 2012). According to Chaudhuri and

Ghosh (2012), this reciprocal exchange is an extension of traditional apprenticeship models, adapted to contemporary governance contexts and contributed to organizational inclusivity and innovation. In digitalized workplaces, reverse mentoring and peer-based digital support have become increasingly relevant because employees often acquire digital competencies through everyday collaboration rather than through formal training alone (OECD, 2024).

In addition, employees frequently learn and refine work practices through experimentation, reflection on outcomes, and feedback from peers and supervisors, particularly in contexts where formal guidance is incomplete or rapidly evolving (Edmondson, 1999; Kirby et al., 2003). For instance, when newly introduced decentralization procedures were not fully understood, local officials often learned how to conduct participatory planning meetings and prepare development plans through repeated practice, feedback, and adjustment over successive planning cycles (NCDD, 2021; Öjendal & Sedara, 2006). Such adaptive practices correspond to what Ellström (2011) described as developmental learning and embed learning within everyday administrative routines, thereby contributing to organizational resilience and problem-solving capacity (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004).

Mentoring, peer exchange, reverse mentoring, and experiential adaptation collectively enhance the adaptive capacity of local administrations, which support the professional performance and responsiveness in contexts characterized by resource constraints and ongoing reform pressures (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Kyndt et al., 2014; Murphy, 2012). As synthesized in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, these practices illustrate how learner agency interacts with organizational affordances and broader institutional structures to shape IWL processes that sustain effective sub-national governance. Further, learning theory provides insights into the micro-level dynamics of this interaction (Marsick & Watkins, 1992), while governance scholarship complements this perspective by elucidating the institutional conditions under which such learning practices are enabled and embedded within decentralized administrative systems (Hughes & Un, 2011).

Policy implications

IWL has evolved from Cambodia's historical learning traditions into a vital component of contemporary sub-national governance (Chandler, 2008;

Gottesman, 2003; Hangchuon, 2018). As decentralization reforms have expanded administrative responsibilities at local levels, the capacity of civil servants to learn and adapt through informal means has become increasingly important for institutional resilience, effective policy implementation, and the delivery of routine public services (Hughes, 2009; Hughes & Un, 2011; NCDD, 2021). Furthermore, it should be explicitly recognized and supported within national capacity-development frameworks, rather than treated as a residual or incidental by-product of formal training interventions, so that informal workplace learning will contribute consistently to improved governance outcomes (ADB, 2018; Marsick & Watkins, 1992).

Thus, a key implication concerns the role of NASLA as the principal institution responsible for training sub-national civil servants. NASLA's training programs are mainly oriented toward developing knowledge and skills aligned with the functional requirements of decentralized local governance, as articulated in national civil-service and capacity-development policies (Ministry of Interior, 2018). Although this strategic orientation provides a strong foundation for formal training, research on workplace learning and governance practice suggests that it does not yet sufficiently account for the role of IWL processes, including peer mentoring, reflective dialogue, and experiential adaptation, through which formal knowledge is interpreted, contextualized, and sustained in practice (Hughes, 2009; Marsick & Watkins, 1992). In this regard, integrating IWL more explicitly into NASLA's human resource development approach could help bridge the persistent gap between classroom instruction and workplace application (Eraut, 2004; Hughes, 2009; Wenger, 1998). The learning and organizational literature highlights approaches such as structured peer-learning arrangements, reflective learning tools, and communities of practice that support participants in applying, contextualizing, and refining formal training through ongoing workplace interactions (Eraut, 2004; Kyndt et al., 2014; Wenger, 1998).

The National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD) is identified in the decentralization and local governance research as the central coordinating institution responsible for steering policies, implementation, and capacity development reforms within Cambodia's sub-national administration system (NCDD, 2010, 2021; Rohdewohld, 2022). As the central coordinating body for decentralization reforms, NCDD influences how capacity-

development priorities are defined, implemented, and assessed across sub-national administrations (NCDD, 2010, 2021). From this perspective, capacity-development frameworks and performance-based mechanisms should be designed to recognize and encourage IWL practices. For instance, performance assessments may consider the extent to which supervisors support mentoring, facilitate peer learning, and encourage reflective problem-solving as part of everyday administrative work (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2004). In this sense, explicitly acknowledging such practices would signal that informal workplace learning is a valued dimension of professional development and could contribute to a culture of continuous improvement by making workplace learning more visible and sustainable (Eraut, 2004).

The comparative experiences from other ASEAN countries further reinforce these implications. In Indonesia, the decentralization reforms were accompanied by peer mentoring, interregional learning, and knowledge-sharing forums that complemented formal training and enabled local officials to exchange practical solutions across districts and provinces (Antlöv, 2003; Hofman & Kaiser, 2004). In Vietnam, the provincial training institutions and leadership programs have supported practice-based learning arrangements in which officials share experiential knowledge related to planning, budgeting, and local economic management, particularly under conditions of administrative experimentation and uneven capacity (Malesky, 2009). Similarly, in the Philippines, the Local Government Academy has promoted communities of practice and peer-learning initiatives that connect municipal and city officials to disseminate innovations and adapt best practices to local contexts (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011). Thus, these experiences illustrate how formal institutions can act as facilitators of informal workplace learning rather than substitutes for it, offering relevant reference points for Cambodia's ongoing decentralization and capacity-development efforts.

It is worth noting that leadership commitment is widely identified in previous studies as a critical condition for institutionalizing IWL within organizations (Marsick & Watkins, 1992; Senge, 1990). Within sub-national administrations, governors, deputy governors, and senior managers play a decisive role in shaping organizational learning climates through their influence on communication practices, supervisory relationships, and everyday managerial decisions (Edmondson, 1999). Thus, leaders who encourage open

communication, recognize mentoring and peer support, and engage in reflective management practices are more likely to embed learning within routine administrative work rather than treating it as a supplementary activity (Edmondson, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1992). From this perspective, leadership-development programs at NASLA and related institutions could place greater emphasis on learning-oriented management and coaching approaches that align leadership practices with organizational-learning principles, emphasizing shared vision, reflection, and continuous improvement (Senge, 1990). Such alignment would support the transition toward more adaptive and knowledge-based forms of sub-national governance.

The integrative nature of these implications is illustrated through a synthesized continuum of informal workplace learning that links historical learning traditions with contemporary institutional practices and prospective governance innovation. This continuum traces the evolution of learning mechanisms from community-based apprenticeship and experiential transmission to more formalized yet still practice-oriented forms of mentoring, peer learning, and collaborative problem-solving within sub-national administrations (Chandler, 2008; Hangchuon, 2018). It further emphasizes that the institutionalization of IWL does not occur spontaneously but depends on deliberate policy design, sustained leadership commitment, and alignment with national human resource development and decentralization frameworks (Marsick & Watkins, 1992; NCDD, 2021; Senge, 1990).

Thus, embedding IWL within Cambodia's institutional arrangements could strengthen the sustainability of decentralization reforms and support the professionalization of the civil service. By integrating IWL into training strategies, performance management systems, and leadership development initiatives, the sub-national administrations may be better positioned to function as learning-oriented organizations capable of adapting to technological change and evolving governance demands to reach their ultimate goals for better public service delivery and better quality of life for residents.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the conceptual foundations, historical roots, contemporary practices, and policy implications of IWL in Cambodia's sub-national administrations. Drawing on the perspectives of Marsick and Watkins (1992), Eraut (2004), and Billett (2001), together with scholarship on Cambodia's

decentralization reforms, the article conceptualizes IWL as a multi-level process shaped by individual agency, organizational affordances, and national environments. In this conceptualization, IWL serves as a mechanism for professional development, an organizational resource for adaptation, and an institutional process that supports administrative continuity during ongoing reforms.

The article has also shown that IWL plays a critical role in strengthening administrative capacity within decentralized governance systems. In Cambodia, where decentralization reforms depend heavily on the capabilities of sub-national administrations, workplace-based learning processes remain an important mechanism through which officials develop and apply professional knowledge into the real-world workplace. In this sense, mentoring, peer interaction, reflective practice, and experiential learning complement formal training by supporting the adaptation of knowledge to everyday administrative challenges and evolving governance demands. The article underscores the importance of recognizing IWL as a significant dimension of public-sector capacity development and reinforces its relevance for strengthening administrative competence, organizational adaptability, and governance effectiveness within decentralized administrative systems.

Despite its contributions, this article has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is based on a conceptual-historical review and does not incorporate primary empirical evidence from Cambodia's sub-national administrations. Second, the analysis relies on available scholarly and institutional sources, which may not fully capture variations in informal workplace learning practices across different administrative settings. Future research should therefore examine the proposed conceptualization through qualitative and quantitative studies, with particular attention to how IWL influences administrative performance, organizational adaptability, and public-service delivery within decentralized governance systems.

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