

Millennials and the changing workplace: The process of organizational learning

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Abstract

Members of the workplace are at the heart of the organizational learning process. They play a major role by communicating their shared perceptions, distributing knowledge, and acting as human components of the broader organizational memory. Today, three generations cohabitate in the work environment, each of whom have their own distinct traits that influence how they perceive and enact learning. This thesis explores how Millennials experience organizational learning and its significance. By applying Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework, the process of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing are considered from the standpoint of the Millennial generation. The methodology for this study includes semi-structured interviews and qualitative thematic analysis to better understand this relationship. This is based on 13 conversations with members all drawn from a single organization. The findings describe how Millennials see learning as fundamental as well as how they overcome the challenges they face and apply their knowledge.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The current work environment in Canada is transforming due to changing demographics, values, and attitudes (Burke & Ng, 2006). In part, this can be attributed to the aging workforce and an increase in generational diversity in the organization. According to Statistics Canada (2011), 42.4% of the working-age population are between the age of 45 and 64, most of whom were a part of the Baby Boomer generation in 2011. As a result, the current workplace is occupied by an unprecedented number of senior employees who are also retiring much later in life. As reported by Statistics Canada (2011), at the age of 50, men and women are continuing to work for average of 16 years before retiring, as opposed to 13 years in the late 1990s (Carrière & Galarneau, 2012). Therefore, as younger generations begin their career, they join a workforce heavily populated by three distinct age groups.

Baby Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960, are nearing retirement and are also the eldest generation in the organization. They are followed by Generation X, born between 1961 and 1980, and Millennials, born between 1981 and 2000. The Millennial generation is the most recent to enter the workforce, prompting more discussion on the changing values and attitudes apparent in the organization today (Burke & Ng, 2006; Wok & Hashim, 2013).

A generation can be defined as a group of individuals who are similar in age and have experienced the same formative events in their youth (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). These major events come to determine, to a certain extent, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; thus, each generation has a unique set of characteristics that shape how they conduct themselves (Espinoza, Rusch & Ukleja, 2010). In the context of the workplace, these traits determine their expectations, demands, and work habits (Wok & Hashim, 2013). Considering the current multi-generational work environment, organizations are challenged with managing generational differences in

workplace attitudes and behaviours (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Additionally, the differences among generations also applies to how they each perceive various organizational practices, such as learning. With this in mind, this thesis is interested in exploring the relationship between Millennials and the process of organizational learning.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the appeal and importance of organizational learning (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). For instance, seeing as Baby Boomers make up a large portion of the workforce and are nearing retirement, organizations are losing important skills and knowledge as they leave (Burke & Ng, 2006). To avoid any negative ramifications, organizations must ensure the successful transfer of knowledge from senior generations to those below them (Carrière & Galarnau, 2012). It is important to note this is not only relevant because Baby Boomers are retiring; rather, the transfer of knowledge among colleagues is important to maintain a prosperous organization (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011).

Learning is also crucial to the long-term success and improved renewal of the organization (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003). Given the fast-paced and changing nature of today's organizational climate, it is more difficult for organizations to remain sustainable and competitive (Agarwal & Helfat, 2009). For an organization to survive in such an environment, it must constantly adapt to maintain excellence. It is argued that organizational learning is crucial to the ongoing process of innovation and adaptation; without which, the organization would remain stagnant and struggle to survive (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003). As a result, extensive research has been committed to understanding how organizations learn (Argote, 2013).

There are many different perspectives on organizational learning, including some that conflict with others. In its simplest form, learning is conceived as “the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding” (Fiol & Lyles, 1985, p. 803). Regardless of

the different ideologies and frameworks, most researchers agree that learning involves the members of the organization (Crossan, Lane, White & Djurfeldt, 1995). Studies have shown that despite whether learning occurs at the individual, group, and/or organizational level, members are at the heart of this process (Crossan, Maurer & White, 2011; Huber 1991). Most studies would contend that they play a major role in communicating their shared perceptions as well as distributing knowledge and acting as a human component of organizational memory (Crossan et al., 1995; Huber, 1991). Thus, to ensure the successful transfer of knowledge and the renewal of the organization, it is crucial to understand the various behaviours and attitudes of members.

Although a significant amount of research has been done in the area of organizational learning and has referenced members as core to the framework, most focus on either developing new models or improving existing conceptions (Crossan et al., 2011; Huang & Shih, 2011; Senge, 2006); few studies focus directly on the individual's relationship to the learning process. Additionally, with elder generations retiring later in life and the stark contrast of work ethics among generations, there is an increasing need to understand this relationship in the context of a multi-generational work environment. In an effort to discern this relationship, this research intends to explore the organizational learning process from the standpoint of the Millennial generation. Using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 13 Millennial respondents, this research aims to explore this topic further. Following the data collection, a thematic analysis will be conducted to derive meaning from the findings.

There are two main benefits of this study. First, this research is of significance to current organizations to better comprehend how to adapt learning practices for the Millennial generation. In doing so, there are two leading advantages. These include the ability to ensure the seamless transfer of knowledge and increase the organization's capacity for successful renewal. Thus,

understanding the details of their experience and the difficulties they face is a timely and relevant research matter; especially considering the Millennial generation is the future of the workforce.

Second, this study will contribute to two main areas of scholarship; specifically, literature concerning organizational learning and workplace diversity. The central objective of this thesis is to interpret the concept of organizational learning from the perspective of the Millennial generation and within the context of a multi-generational environment. The findings will add insight to organizational learning by exploring the process as experienced by Millennials; thus, contributing to a better understanding of the process from a unique perspective that has otherwise been unexplored. Likewise, considering Millennials do not learn in isolation from their colleagues, the findings will be useful to research on workplace diversity. They can contribute to an understanding of the relationship among generations during the learning process in hopes of better managing a diverse body of employees.

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis has six chapters. Chapter One presents the research context and objectives of this study. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature, outlines the theoretical framework, and states the three leading research questions. Chapter Three details the methodological approach, data collection, and analysis techniques. Chapter Four reports the findings from the interview data. Chapter Five further discusses the results closely with the theoretical framework. Lastly, Chapter Six presents the conclusions and implications of the findings, the limitations, and the possibilities for future research.

1.2 Summary

Chapter One introduced the research context of this study. The current workforce is populated by three distinct generations, each of whom have a unique set of traits that influence

how they perceive and enact learning. Without a proper understanding of how they experience learning, organizations cannot adjust practices or target learning to improve the renewal of the workplace.

By exploring the process of organizational learning from the stand point of the Millennial generation, this thesis intends to examine how they perceive the process to better comprehend how organizations can improve and target learning initiatives in the work environment thus contributing to the successful transfer of knowledge and the strategic renewal of the organization. Chapter Two will review the relevant literature, outline the theoretical framework, and present the research questions that will drive this study forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The objective of the literature review is to provide readers with the necessary background as this study sets out to examine how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning. This section is a combination of the literature and concepts that underpin this study and as such, is divided into four separate yet complementary segments. This chapter will first provide an overview of organizational learning followed by relevant literature on organizational culture, sensemaking, and lastly, intergenerational communication and the Millennial generation.

2.1 Organizational Learning

There exist a variety of perspectives on organizational learning and as a result, a variety of sometimes conflicting definitions. Ultimately, learning can be conceptualized as “the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding” (Fiol & Lyles, 1985, p. 803). However, this is a basic definition that does not account for details such as the levels of learning, whether it is a cognitive or behavioural process, and if there is a connection with performance (Crossan et al., 1995; Fiol & Lyles, 1985). There has been a lack of cohesion amongst the varying definitions because researchers have applied the terminology associated to organizational learning to different domains (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). For instance, March and Olsen (1975) study the cognitive limitations of managers and the effects on learning, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) focus on product innovation, and Huber (1991) adopts an information-processing perspective. In doing so, they have each conceptualized organizational learning in a different manner.

According to March and Olsen (1975), organizational learning occurs at the level of the individual and the organization; however, they do not account for the group level nor do they recognize that one level may affect the other. Given that the focus of their study is on the

cognitive limitations of learning from experience, March and Olsen (1975) support the link between cognition and action. Nonetheless, they argue that there is only an indirect link between learning and performance considering not all learning is intentional and there are often disconnects within learning (March and Olsen, 1975).

According to Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) knowledge is the primary focus of organizational learning. Although it is not considered a substantial part of their model, they account for a multilevel framework that spans the individual, group, and organizational level (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Specifically, Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) conceptualize learning as a process in which knowledge is created by the individual and then embedded within the organization. While they acknowledge the various levels, Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) focus on the connected nature of individual and group learning as well as the processes which link them.

According to Huber's (1991) information processing perspective, organizational learning is a multilevel framework that encompasses the individual, group, and organizational level. He goes as far to suggest that his perspective of learning can even extend to the level of the industry and society; however, he focuses specifically on the learning process from the outlook of the individual and does not link the process across the various levels (Huber, 1991). Considering his process is rooted in cognition, Huber (1991) argues that cognition affects action and that change does not always need to be behavioural. Likewise, Huber (1991) believes that learning does not always need to be intentional or conscious nor is learning always correct; therefore, he would maintain that there is only an indirect link between learning and performance. Although some of these conceptions do overlap, there is still enough of a disconnect that individual researchers often position their framework in contradiction to others.

There has been an increased focus on the study of learning and its main component, knowledge (Botha, Kourie & Snyman, 2008). Due to social and economic trends such as globalization, the diversifying workforce, and the changing nature of work itself, the average organization must become increasingly agile to react rapidly to the changing environment (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Botha et al., 2008). This means that to remain competitive and prosperous, an organization must focus on nurturing individual learning and, more importantly, organizational learning (Botha et al., 2008). Although an organization may adopt a learning model with those aspirations in mind, learning does not necessarily result in change, adaptation, or action (Argote, 2013). Nonetheless, a changing organizational climate means that organizations must also be receptive to change and educated on topics such as learning, knowledge transfer, and retention (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011).

Many of the debates around organizational learning are concentrated on whether learning is behavioural or cognitive and tacit or explicit. Cognitive theorists believe learning is only achieved if there has been a change, possibly unnoticed, in the thought process (Crossan et al., 1995; Huber, 1991; Senge, 2006). In contrast, behavioural theorists argue learning only occurs if there is a shift in behaviours that is not necessarily preceded by a change in the way of thinking (Crossan et al., 1995; Daft & Weick, 1984; Herriott, Levinthal & March, 1985). Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is difficult to represent or articulate whereas explicit knowledge takes the form of artifacts (Botha et al., 2008). More recent literature on these debates maintains that knowledge can manifest itself either cognitively or behaviourally and includes both tacit and explicit components (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Nonetheless, at the very core of organizational learning is dialogue, without which individuals and groups cannot adequately exchange knowledge nor establish a shared understanding (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008).

Organizational learning is conceptualized in this study using Crossan et al.'s (1999) multi-level approach. They define organizational learning as a multi-level dynamic process whereby the opinions, feelings, and actions of individuals and groups transform and become fixed in the organization as time progresses (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Likewise, learning is conceived as a means of attaining the strategic renewal of the organization and accordingly, is the fundamental phenomenon of interest for this thesis (Crossan et al., 2011). Strategic renewal is characterized as the process and outcome of a simultaneous refreshment and replacement of organizational attributes that could affect long-term possibilities (Agarwal & Helfat, 2009). When referring specifically to organizational learning, renewal marries continuity and change not only at the level of the individual or group, but most importantly at the level of the organization (Crossan et al., 2011). For it to be strategic, the organization must explore and learn in new ways all the while exploiting what has already been learned (Crossan et al., 2011). The two critical challenges of renewal are recognizing and managing the tensions between exploration and exploitation (Crossan et al., 1999). As a result, finding an equilibrium between them both and understanding this tension has become a central requirement in theorizing and practicing organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999). On that account, I choose to focus on Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing learning as the theoretical foundation for my study.

2.1.1 The 4I Framework. Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework attempts to consolidate the literature of organizational learning to create a clear understanding and a concrete connection between strategy and learning (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Specifically, this framework explains how learning, which occurs at the level of the individual, then impacts learning at the level of the group and subsequently that of the organization. This is referred to as the feed-forward process

(Crossan et al., 1999). Likewise, knowledge that has been institutionalized also impacts learning top-down from the organization to the group and individual through the feedback process (Crossan et al., 1999). In contrast to many other learning frameworks, Crossan et al. (1999) acknowledge that learning is not a linear progression with a distinct beginning and ending; rather, it is recursive and moves both forwards and backwards simultaneously. The 4I framework consists of four associated processes (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing) which serve to connect three levels of organizational learning (the individual, the group, and the organizational level) (see Figure 1). The 4I framework recognizes the tension between exploration and exploitation, considers the three levels of learning and their relationship, identifies four of the social and psychological processes that link the levels, and lastly recognizes that cognition affects action and vice versa (Crossan et al., 2011).

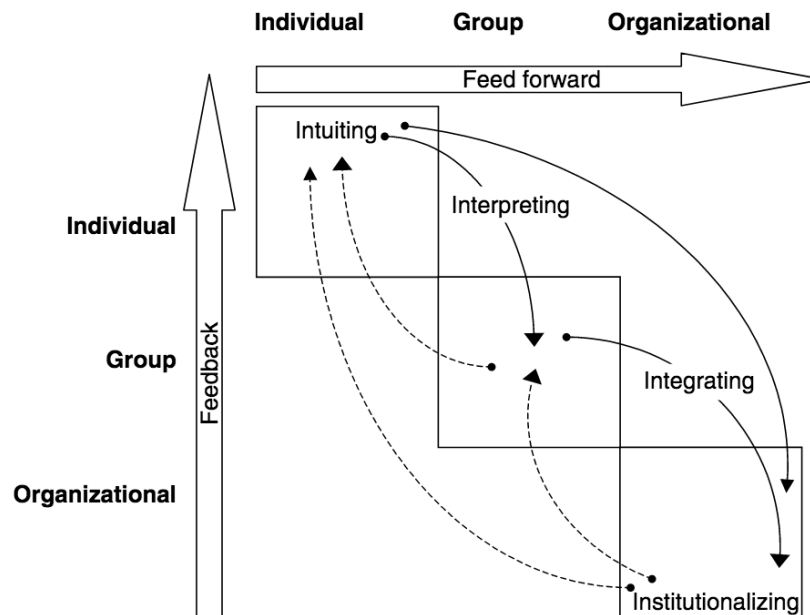


Figure 1 – Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework

At the heart of the 4I framework is the tension between learning new ways (exploration) and exploiting what has already been learned (exploitation) (Crossan et al., 2011). This tension is

crucial to strategic renewal and is apparent in the feed-forward and feedback process across the individual, group, and organizational levels (Crossan et al., 2011). The feed-forward learning flow gives the organization the opportunity to innovate and renew as well as relate to whether and how individual learning feeds forward into learning at the group and organizational levels (Crossan et al., 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). This can take the shape of a change to structures, systems, products, strategies, procedures, culture, and more (Vera & Crossan, 2004). In contrast, feedback is just the opposite. It reinforces what the organization has already learned and determines whether and how institutionalized learning, such as systems, structures, and strategy, affect individual and group learning (Crossan et al., 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). The process of feed-forward and feedback do not follow one another in a linear manner; rather, they occur simultaneously across the multiple levels thus creating a strain on organizational resources and the tension that is essential to strategic renewal (Crossan et al., 2011).

As originally conceptualized by Argyris and Schön (1978), organizational learning is a multi-level phenomenon that occurs only through the experience and actions of its individuals; however, the sum of individual learning does not equal organizational learning (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Given that only individuals can acquire knowledge and innovative ideas, it is critical to understand how individuals learn in the interest of understanding learning as an organizational level phenomenon (Botha et al., 2008; Crossan et al., 1999; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Furthermore, learning is a social practice that occurs through interactions as individuals share ideas, take action, and develop common meanings (Botha et al., 2008; Crossan et al., 1999). As such, it is necessary to study the connections between the individual, group, and organizational levels. Over time the relationships can become structured as individual learning

and shared understandings between groups become institutionalized as organizational artifacts (Crossan et al., 1999).

The multiple levels identified by Crossan et al. (1999) are bound by four social and psychological processes: intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. Where one ends and the other begins is not clearly defined; however, intuiting occurs distinctly at the individual level and institutionalizing at the organizational level (Crossan et al., 1999). Both interpreting and integrating bridge the individual/group and group/organizational levels respectively (Crossan et al., 1999). Together they are the key facets of the framework and are meant to demonstrate the vivid interplay between the processes and levels (Crossan et al., 2011). Crossan et al. (1999) deliberately used verbs when labeling the four phases with the intentions of exemplifying the action or state of being of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. Choosing to use verbs as opposed to nouns was a conscious decision to convey the active cognitive and behavioural perspectives of learning processes (Crossan et al., 2011).

Intuiting is defined as “the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience” (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 525). This takes the shape of experiences, images and metaphors and only affects others when they attempt to interact with the individual at hand (Crossan et al., 1999). Interpreting is embodied in language, cognitive maps, conversation, dialogue and as a result is a social activity that progresses from pre-verbal to verbal (Crossan et al., 1999). This is the process of explaining an insight or idea to one’s self or to others either through words or actions thereby leaning heavily on sensemaking theory (Crossan et al., 1999; Weick, 1995). Vital to the third process, integrating, is both dialogue and joint action which are necessary to create a shared understanding. This is the actual development of creating a shared understanding and taking unified action by adjusting individual perceptions

(Crossan et al., 1999). It is important to note that although this phase is initially informal, if coordinated action does ensue in a recurring and significant manner, then it will become institutionalized (Crossan et al., 1999). Lastly, institutionalizing takes the form of routinized actions, defined tasks, procedures, and culture all to ensure that certain actions occur (Crossan et al., 1999). This is the process of ingraining learning that has occurred into the organization through systems, structures, procedures, and strategy (Crossan et al., 1999).

The dichotomy between cognition and action are not explicitly marked in the 4I framework; however, Crossan et al. (1999) identify it as critical to the feed-forward and feedback flow of the four processes. Although this dichotomy breaks down during the shift from individual to group to organizational level, one cannot be separated from the other (Crossan et al., 1999). As opposed to fields such as knowledge management, Crossan et al.'s (1999) conception of organizational learning directly ties cognition and action. As the scholars explain, "understanding guides action, but action also informs understanding" (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 524). For example, it is necessary not only to examine the process of intuiting, which is largely cognitive, but also how it evolves and translates into behaviour, no matter how minute (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003).

The 4I framework presented by Crossan et al. (1999) recognizes the competitive and developing nature of the organization. Core to their conceptualization of organizational learning is that knowledge and practice are ultimately inseparable and that learning is a social phenomenon and is integrated into the culture of the workplace at various levels (Crossan et al., 1999). Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework is chosen as the foundation of this study for two main reasons. First, the multi-level approach the researchers adopt illustrates the dynamic interplay of organizational learning. The second reason is due to the soundness of the model

since it is often cited as a landmark approach and it was awarded the *2009 Decade Award* for the most cited Academy of Management Review (AMR) article of the decade (Crossan et al., 2011). Next, I will look at the learning organization and the fundamental traits that differentiate it from organizational learning.

2.1.2 The Learning Organization. While similar to organizational learning, a learning organization is a form of an organization that facilitates the learning of its members by creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993). A learning organization specifically refers to a type of organization that demonstrates specific characteristics; most notably, including a change in the processes and behaviours of the workplace in the interest of enhancing performance (Garvin, 1993). These types of firms learn continuously and collectively as well as transform constantly to maintain knowledge and empower its people to learn and work as one (Botha et al., 2008). Since a learning organization embodies what has been learned and modifies its behaviour accordingly, it can be superior to its competitor and thus, able to sustain a competitive advantage (Appelbaum & Gallagher, 2000). Generally, this realm of research is targeted at practitioners who work at creating such a sustainable form of organization and realize the importance and distinction of organizational learning (Yang, Watkins & Marsick, 2004).

Senge's (2006) systems thinking approach is a popular understanding of the learning organization. Underpinning his framework is a basic shift in how members think and interact at the individual level (Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) identifies five principles as essential for success to achieve the status of a learning organization. These include systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 2006). Likewise, learning organizations are meant to be adept in five central areas: systematic problem solving,

experimenting with new approaches, learning from their own experience and past history, learning from the experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization (Garvin, 1993).

Organizational learning and learning organizations do not exist in isolation, it is important to look at how other workplace practices influence this process (see Appendix 1). I will now provide a review of organizational culture and highlight its capacity to support learning initiatives.

2.2 Organizational Culture

Organizational culture was formally introduced into the field of management and organizational studies in the late 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to explain a variety of behaviours and patterns that are found in the workplace (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983). By applying existing concepts such as beliefs, ideology, language, ritual, myth and more to the organization, scholars strived to clarify the ambiguity that existed around so many organizational operations (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1985; Smircich, 1983). With roots stemming from anthropology and sociology, an array of definitions have been presented by scholars over the years indicating that an organization could possess a distinct culture or that a shared set of values, attitudes, and norms can inform the actions of organizational members (Glynn, Giorgi & Lockwood, 2013). However, the proliferation of research on organizational culture created confusion and discrepancies between theoretical understandings (Martin, 1992). For instance, the early stages of this research considered organizational culture as consistent among employees, levels, and departments. whereas subsequent publications proposed that culture could be heterogeneous within a single

organization (Glynn et al., 2013; Schein, 1985; Van Maanen, 1991). This meant that organizational culture was more nuanced and complex than previously understood (Glynn et al., 2013).

In an effort to sift through the literature and create a coherent understanding of organizational culture, a variety of academics began to publish studies that represent the complexity as well as the range of conflicting assumptions and methods (Martin, 1992; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Schultz, 1995). Martin's (1992) summary of the dilemmas and lack of theoretical and methodological conformity in culture literature is one of the seminal works on this topic. In response to the wavering perceptions and opinions, Martin (1992) presents three perspectives of culture that characterize the research. These include the integration perspective, the differentiation perspective, and the fragmentation perspective (Martin, 1992; Martin, 2002). Each of these viewpoints also includes managerial, critical, and ostensibly neutral oriented studies (Martin, 2008).

In integration studies, cultural manifestations are consistent and any contradicting views of culture are devalued (Martin, 1992). As a result, these studies assume there is cultural consensus across the organization and disregard the notion of ambiguity as having no place within culture (Martin, 1992). With a focus on the views of executives and top employees, these often have a managerial orientation thus making this perspective attractive to practitioners (Martin, 2002). Culture supposedly derives from the values articulated by management and is maintained by hiring people who share similar priorities (Martin, 2002). Additionally, integration studies generally argue that there is a link between a strong culture and greater commitment, loyalty, efficiency, and productivity throughout the organization (Martin, 2008). Critical studies of this nature position culture as a tool used by managers to create a sense of control, conformity,

and sometimes misery for organizational members (Martin, 2008). In contrast, ostensibly neutral studies define culture as singular and accepted organization-wide; however, they make no judgements on whether this improves business efficiency or has any other consequences (Martin, 2008).

In differentiation studies, cultural manifestations are interpreted in a variety of ways (Martin, 1992). This perspective acknowledges that subcultures are present within the organization and that they may be mutually reinforcing as well as sometimes conflicting and independent from one another (Martin, 2008). Therefore, differentiation studies maintain that organizations are composed of overlapping cultures that exist in harmony, conflict, and indifference (Martin, 2002). These studies tend to be more critical by illustrating how subcultures extended by management are commonly challenged or rejected by lower level employees (Martin, 2008). While occupational subcultures are typically the first to come to mind, subcultures can also be bound by other features such as gender, generation, or geographical location (Martin, 2002). Managerial differentiation studies are concerned with exploring the subcultural differences and, at times, how they coexist and contribute to the organization (Martin, 1992). Ostensibly neutral differentiation studies describe culture as generating inconsistent meanings and how such meanings then form subcultural groups; again, they refrain from making any judgement beyond that (Martin, 2008).

In fragmentation studies, any cultural manifestation is interpreted in a variety of ways thus producing contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies (Martin, 2008). This perspective defines culture as entirely ambiguous by arguing that clarity, consistency, and consensus are idealized and oversimplified (Martin, 2002). Therefore, the understanding of ambiguities is a central practice in organizational culture (Martin, 1992). Depending on the political orientation of the

study, ambiguity can be conceived in different ways. Managerial oriented studies of this nature position ambiguity as a strategic tool that can be used to create a connection with employees, where as critical studies maintain that ambiguity is detrimental yet a central and unavoidable part of working life (Martin, 2008). Ostensibly neutral studies highlight the pervasiveness of ambiguity and its multiple interpretations; however, they refrain from making any further judgements (Martin, 2008).

Ultimately, Martin (1992) argues that organizational culture contains elements that are consistent with at least one of the three perspectives; however, using multiple viewpoints within a single study offers a more complete view of organizational culture. This is reinforced by other scholars such as Ouchi and Wilkins (1985) who maintain that a contemporary understanding of organizational culture comes not from a “single dominant point of view or method but [from] a rich mixture of ideas and approaches” (p. 459). Therefore, I adopt Schein’s (1990) understanding of organizational culture as the preferred definition in this thesis. While Schein (1990) maintains a managerial integration perspective, I also argue that there are multiple subcultures within the organization, one of which are the distinct generations.

In its most basic form, culture is widely cited as “the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that groups hold and that determines how it perceives, thinks about and reacts to its various environments” (Schein, 1996, p. 236). Schein (1990) asserts there are three levels of culture: artifacts, values and beliefs, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts represent the most observable level including rituals, language, myths, dress, and the organization of space (Schneider, Ehrhart & Macey, 2013). Values are considered crucial to the organization and are often communicated by management although they do not always reflect the reality as perceived by members (Schein, 1990). At the deepest level of culture are the assumptions, which are often

unconscious and establish perceptions, thought processes, attitudes and behaviours (Schein, 1990).

2.2.1 The Role of Organizational Culture. Although the culture of an organization serves many purposes, one concern is how it either supports or inhibits organizational learning. Literature around this topic maintains that learning frequently manifests itself in the values of organizational members (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005). The extent to which a learning culture is nurtured depends on the employee's willingness to create, transfer, share, and apply knowledge (Tilchin & Essawi, 2013). Specifically, it depends on the level of consensus that develops among members about the value of learning and application of new learning in pursuit of organizational goals and objectives (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005). For instance, the individual members must be inclined to learn and share what they have learned. As the number of members who are prepared to do so increases and the new knowledge is applied then a learning culture is produced and as a group they work towards achieving the goals and objectives of the organization. However, if there is a lack of consensus among the members about the importance of learning, then there will also be a lack of a learning culture. Organizational culture can further support learning by embodying traits such as the acquisition of information, the distribution and sharing of learning, and the recognition of learning and its application (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005).

Furthermore, organizational culture can be used as a vehicle to distribute learning. For instance, while Mena and Chabowsky (2015) do not explicitly reference organizational culture, they assert that learning is transferred from the individual and group level to the larger organization through shared beliefs, routines, and artifacts thus referencing Schein's (1990) levels of culture. Namely, routines and artifacts are used during the institutionalizing phase as a means of embedding the learned information from the individual and group level into that of the

organization (Crossan et al., 1999). It is important to note the opposite is true as well. A (sub)culture that does not support learning, or simply neglects it, can cripple an organization's ability to learn. As such, it is evident that culture plays a critical role in the process of organizational learning. A key component of both organizational learning and culture is recognizing the role of making sense in both of these constructs (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). I will now provide a review of the concept of sensemaking as it relates to the organization.

2.3 Sensemaking in Organizational Learning

Since the publication of Weick's (1995) seminal work on empirical sensemaking, research on the topic has flourished in a variety of contexts and diverse ways. While many scholars would agree on what prompts sensemaking, there is a lack of consensus on several points including what it encompasses, how it is accomplished, its temporal orientation, and the degree to which it is shared (Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2010; Klein, Moon & Hoffman, 2006; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). For example, it is sometimes pictured as individual and cognitive whereas in other cases it is social and discursive (Klein et al., 2006; Weick, 1995). Others for the most part will label it as retrospective; however, there are the few that conceptualize it as a prospective process (Gephart et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). Ultimately, sensemaking can be understood as the process that individuals engage in to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events (Rouleau & Balogun, 2010). Therefore, sensemaking is not concerned with getting it right or the truth; rather, it is about continuously working through a story or circumstance so it becomes complete, incorporates more observations, and can withstand criticism (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

There is no single agreed-upon definition of sensemaking; however, there are four recurring traits that prevail. The first is that sensemaking is dynamic thus meaning it is a process where sense is made “in an ongoing present in which past experience is projected upon possible futures” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010, p. 27). The second trait is referred to as cues, which play a central role both as a trigger and while sensemaking unfolds (Brown, 2000). Members are often confronted with issues or events, also known as cues, that are confusing or surprising and need explanation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). As well, cues shape sensemaking since the process includes interpreting and explaining cues continually (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010). Despite there being debate about whether sensemaking is an individual or group practice, it is undoubtedly social (Weick, 1995). Even those who are making sense on their own, are influenced by the presence of others whether it be actual, imagined or implied (Weick, 1995). Scholars often contend that sensemaking is social considering people generate, negotiate, and uphold a shared sense of meaning (Brown, 2000; Gephart et al., 2010; Mills et al., 2010; Sonenshein, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, sensemaking is an issue of interaction whether it be language, talk, or communication; therefore, events and environments, such as organizations, are talked into existence (Rouleau & Balogun, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). The fourth feature is that members take action in the interest of making sense of a situation and inevitably, they enact the environment they were trying to understand (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Therefore, sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation whereby making sense occurs among people, places, and events in a perpetual effort to comprehend connections, anticipate their course, and act accordingly (Klein et al., 2006).

Weick’s (1995) framework underpins sensemaking in organizational studies and is widely cited among scholars (Blatt, Christianson, Sutcliffe & Rosenthal, 2006; Maitlis &

Christianson, 2014; Mills et al., 2010; Rouleau & Balogun, 2010); therefore, it is selected as the leading definition in this study. While many of the properties outlined by Weick (1995) overlap with the traits above, Weick clearly labels and delineates each property to provide an alternate tool to understand organizations (Mills et al., 2010). According to Weick (1995) sensemaking is understood as a process that is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The first property, grounded in identity construction, maintains that as individuals, we are constantly seeking an identity that is consistent and positive; however, identity construction is constantly being redefined through interactions and experiences (Weick, 1995). “Thus, identity construction is about making sense of the sensemaker” (Mills et al., 2010, p. 184). As its label suggests, sensemaking is also retrospective in that people act and then rely on past experiences to make sense of a current situation (Weick, 1995). Another property of sensemaking is that it is enactive of sensible environments. This means that as we make sense of an experience within our environment, we simultaneously create a reality (Weick, 1995). The fourth property, social, suggests that sensemaking is a process that occurs in tandem with other individuals, whether they be physically present or not (Mills et al., 2010). Sensemaking is also ongoing in that it is constant with no distinct beginning or end (Weick, 1995). Another property is that sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues. This implies that at times we focus on certain cues and disregard others to reinforce an understanding of an event (Weick, 1995). Lastly, according to Weick (1995) sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. In other words, we draw upon cues that are plausible rather than accurate when we make sense of an event (Weick, 1995).

Considering Weick's (1995) interpretation, sensemaking is crucial to the study of organizations. For instance, when members experience ambiguity in the context of the workplace, they attempt to understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others thus shaping their environment (Rouleau & Balogun, 2010). In respect to learning, sensemaking plays a critical role especially in environments where ambiguity is high (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Studies on this topic show that when individuals are faced with an uncertain context, such as something new they must learn, this acts as a cue for sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rouleau & Balogun, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). In reference to Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework, this often occurs during the first two phases of intuiting and interpreting. Although this process is often unclear, these cues enable and encourage learning (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). As the frequency of making sense under these circumstances increases, members acquire a greater sensemaking capability and are arguably more adept at learning (Haas, 2006). This is generally because they have a greater understanding of their own identity, their situation, and how to make sense in the future (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In this respect, sensemaking also prompts the development of fresh insights and practices in the organization (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). With the intentions of enriching the conceptual understanding of organizational learning and accounting for the reflective process of the upcoming research design, I have adopted a sensemaking approach.

A commonality in the literature thus far is the role of the individual and their agency as it pertains to organizational learning, the learning organization, organizational culture, and sensemaking. Therefore, I will now review intergenerational communication, generational identity, and the defining traits of our generations with the intentions of understanding how the above concepts affect one another.

2.4 Intergenerational Communication

Generational theory is credited to Karl Mannheim (1952) who sought to explain how values and attitudes were constructed in individuals and groups (Parry & Urwin, 2011). According to Mannheim's (1952) approach, a generation is defined as "a group of individuals born within the same historical and socio-cultural context, who experience the same formative experiences and develop unifying commonalities as a result" (Lyons & Kuron, 2013, p. 140). Their perspective of the world is commonly shaped by major events that occur primarily in their youth and come to determine, to a certain extent, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Espinoza et al., 2010). At times, there are communication barriers between generations simply because of an absence of shared symbols or metaphors that would normally allow them to connect regarding abstract ideas (Wok & Hashim, 2013). These differences among the generations in the workplace is a form of organizational diversity; thus, diversity literature would contend that managing a diverse group of employees successfully can result in a number of business benefits (Parry & Urwin, 2011). The successful management of the distinct generations, with a focus on intergenerational communication, can lead to successful organizational learning.

Generational diversity represents a critical area of focus in respect to the organization as older generations retire later in life and differences in work ethics and attitudes continue to emerge between age groups (Wok & Hashim, 2013). To better understand the relationship among the various generations, it is necessary to understand the role of communication. As such, intergenerational communication, or communication between the distinct generations, is becoming an increasingly popular realm of research in the field of organizational studies (Claes & Heymans, 2008; McCann & Giles, 2006; Wok & Hashim, 2013). Williams and Nussbaum

(2013) describe intergenerational communication as what happens when individuals from different age groups and with diverse life experiences interact verbally and/or non-verbally.

One of the major challenges contemporary organizations currently face is how to transfer firm specific knowledge and skills from senior employees to new job incumbents (Joshi, Dencker, Franz & Martocchio, 2010). It is challenges such as these that have brought the importance of intergenerational communication to the forefront of conversations around generational diversity, identity, and the strategic renewal of the organization (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Urick, 2014). An important element of intergenerational communication is its capacity to transmit skills, knowledge, experiences, and resources that one generation develops through its position (Joshi et al., 2010). The transfer of this information cannot be taken for granted due to a range of factors that easily facilitate or inhibit the successful communication between generations (Urick, 2014). Given that organizational learning is a social process, especially at the group and organizational level, successful communication between the various generations is critical.

2.4.1 Generational Identity. The growing popularity in generations is partly credited to the increasing interest in understanding how individuals define themselves through social groups (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). Generational identity is defined as when an individual is aware of his or her belonging in a generational group and the significance of this membership to the individual (Joshi et al., 2010; Urick, 2014). This can further be broken down into three facets: age-based identity, cohort-based identity, and incumbency-based identity (Joshi et al., 2010). Age-based identity is where common experiences that are roughly defined by the birth year can shape the identity of an individual (Urick, 2012). Cohort-based identity is when individuals begin an experience, such as work or education, at the same time and come to create a common

identity based on that experience (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Lastly, incumbency-based identity is related to the tenure of a common role for a certain period of time, such as belonging to the current communications team (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). To obtain a thorough perspective of generational identity, it is important to recognize each of the foregoing classes when considering Mannheim's (1952) theory and its affiliation to this thesis.

The construction of generational identity can be explained in part by social identity theory "which posits that individuals invoke available social categories (such as generations) as a means of bringing order to their social environment, refining their self-concept and defining themselves relative to others" (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017, p. 211). If they consider themselves a member of a certain generation, then they will likely define themselves to some extent in terms of the values and characteristics embraced by that group (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004). This can lead to participating in activities and behaviours associated with the generation and contributing to the stereotypes as well (Urlick, 2014). Nonetheless, while generations commonly share certain attributes, it is important to acknowledge that there are still multiple variations and combinations that come with such a categorization. This relates to the process of sensemaking as individuals try to navigate who they are versus how others perceive them. Weick et al. (1995) argue that categories for sensemaking lie in the hands of others, considering who we are depends on how we are perceived. For instance, our identity may be destabilized and we may become more receptive to new meanings if our image changes in the eyes of others (Weick et al., 2005). Regarding generational identity, how one generation may identify with their peers depends largely on how other generations define the Millennial cohort (Weick et al., 2005)

Currently, there are three distinct generations that make up the workforce (Parry & Urwin, 2011). The attributes that characterize these generations are often agreed upon; however,

there is a definite ambiguity around their bounding dates (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). These generations are most commonly known as Baby Boomers (1943 - 1960), Generation X (1961 – 1980), and Millennials (1981 - 2000) (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). I will now discuss the characterizing traits of each generation.

2.4.2 Baby Boomers. Born between the years of 1943 and 1960, Baby Boomers are a product of the post-World War II boom in birth rates (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). They grew up in an optimistic and positive time following the end of the war and were characterized by redefining gender and family roles as well as social upheaval and change (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Baby Boomers were shaped by events such as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights movement, the race to space, and the Cold War (Gordon & Steele, 2005). Given that considerable technological advancements were not attained until their later years, Baby Boomers prefer face-to-face interaction and are not as well versed in technology as the generations that follow (Lester et al., 2012). Nonetheless, they are open to using online tools and resources, especially in their work (Reynolds, Bush & Geist, 2008).

With regards to the organization, Baby Boomers put a firm emphasis on hard work, loyalty, and commitment thus translating into long-term employment and a strong belief that to achieve success, sacrifices must be made (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Jorgensen, 2003). They are known to be ambitious, strong-willed, and consider learning new skills, personal improvement, and a creative work setting as extremely important (Burke & Ng, 2006; Jurkiewicz, 2000). As a result, they value teamwork and group discussion (Jorgensen, 2003). There is generally a distinction that is made between the first and last wave of Baby Boomers (Kupperschmidt, 2000). While the first wave of Boomers is described as workaholics, the last

wave is known to reassess the definition of work and success as well as desire simplicity (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Arguably, their view of the organization resembles more of the beliefs of Generation X thus emphasizing that attitudes towards work were evolving.

2.4.3 Generation X. As the generation that falls between Baby Boomers and Millennials, Generation X is born within the years of 1961 and 1980. They matured during a period of rapid technological and social change thus experiencing financial and social uncertainty as well as little job security (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). As opposed to other generations, they are commonly portrayed in a negative light (Jurkiewicz, 2000; Lester et al., 2008). Traits such as independence, autonomy, and questioning authority are often mistaken for being selfish, cynical, and skeptical (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008, Lester et al., 2008). Generation X was also defined by events such as the Watergate scandal, President Nixon's resignation, the beginning of the energy crisis, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War (Gordon & Steele, 2005).

In terms of the workplace, Generation X holds more of a commitment to their own career than to the organization (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). For instance, rather than pursuing status or tenure, they prefer an environment that values skill development, productivity, and most notably, a work/life balance (Smola & Sutton, 2002). In fact, in the context of the organization, the characteristics of Generation X are generally defined by the importance they place on balance and working to have the means for leisure (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Considering they entered the workforce during the information age, Generation X is known to be technologically competent and comfortable with change; nonetheless, they often seek out the *why* in issues which sometimes translates into resisting authority and misinterpreted behaviours (Jorgensen, 2003; Kupperschmidt, 2000). In sum, it can be argued that this generation was the first to prioritize

their social and private lives in contrast to their professional careers (Jurkiewicz, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Despite this study being focused on the Millennial generation, it is necessary to recognize the defining attributes of Baby Boomers and Generation X to fully acknowledge the similarities and differences between the various groups. This also creates a base upon which to understand and position Millennials as both individuals and members of the workforce. With this in mind, I will now discuss the Millennial generation.

2.4.4 Millennials. Born between the years of 1981 and 2000, Millennials are known to have significant differences in personality traits and work attitudes than the generations that precede them (Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer & Ng, 2015). The sheer amount of research on this generation demonstrates that they add a distinct value to the organization with their energy and drive; however, they also contribute an unprecedented level of complexity as organizations struggle to grasp what challenges and motivates this young group (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Many academic publications, consulting reports, popular press books and more have emerged in response to this difficulty; some of which are critiqued for advancing stereotypes (Espinoza et al., 2010; Lyons, Urick, Kuron & Schweitzer, 2015; PwC, 2011). In support of scholars such as Joshi et al. (2010), Lyons et al. (2015) and Urick (2014), while informed and evidence-based research always prevails, stereotypes are also crucial to comprehending perceptions and identity in the workplace. If the term stereotype is replaced with a more neutral term such as prototype, then bodies of work, including social identity and social categorization theory, can be coupled with the refined perception of generations (Lyons et al., 2015). The prototypes that arise are an important tool in the practice of sensemaking as well as part of the intuitive process of defining social identity (Lyons et al., 2015; Urick, 2014). Taking

this into account, there is considerable potential to contribute to the changing nature of the organization simply through the study of generations.

A review of the literature in regard to Millennials indicates there are a number of opinions and labels that define them, the first being the term digital natives (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Millennials are often identified as such, since they have been heavily shaped by the high-tech environment in which they have matured (Lester, Standifer, Schultz & Windsor, 2012). In contrast to Baby Boomers and Generation X, Millennials are more than just technologically savvy; instead, they are constantly connected to a digital device either receiving information or streaming entertainment (Eisner, 2005). As a result, they are comfortable and able to thrive in a world of instant information access, constant connection, and mediated communication (Twenge & Campbell, 2012).

Millennials have grown up in a time characterized by increasing diversity and globalization (Lyons, Ng & Schweitzer, 2012). They matured in a multi-cultural environment, whether it was the classroom or everyday encounters, and as a result, they see the value in diversity and are in favour of equal treatment for all (Burke & Ng, 2006). Millennials have also experienced globalization from a young age. As new technologies were developed, the worldwide boundaries that had constrained past generations were broken down (Lyons et al., 2012). Accessible technological innovations meant that an enormous amount of information could be shared and accessed both globally and instantly, in turn affecting how people work and live (Burke & Ng, 2006). Millennials have also been shaped by economic, socio, and political instability such as witnessing periods of economic recession and the subsequent events of 9/11 (Lyons, Ng & Schweitzer, 2012).

As they relate to the workforce, there are five common themes that prevail among Millennials: (1) work/life balance, (2) good pay and benefits, (3) opportunities for advancement, (4) meaningful work experiences, and (5) a nurturing work environment (Lyons et al., 2010; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). It is acknowledged that of these themes, certain attributes are also mirrored in Baby Boomers and Generation X; nonetheless, they are unique to Millennials in how they are embodied and contextualized within the current organizational climate (Kuron et al., 2015; Urick, 2014). As the children of Baby Boomers, Millennials have seen their parents work long hours yet experience layoffs and downsizing (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). How children come to understand work and employment is generally influenced by the employment and economic conditions of their parents (Loughlin & Barling, 2001). Therefore, as Millennials enter the workforce, they are insisting on a better work/life balance (Kuron et al., 2015). While this is often perceived as working only within the constraints of a nine-to-five, in reality, Millennials are searching for an employer who can offer them mobility between work and play (Lyons et al., 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2012).

Millennials expect good pay and benefits as well. Some have argued this is also the case for the generations that precede them and while this might be true, the difference is that Millennials feel they do not need to climb corporate ladders nor pay their dues to secure the salary they feel they deserve (Lester et al., 2012; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Martin, 2005). Older generations believe this reflects a sense of entitlement; however, it has been suggested that this is a result of their need for positive feedback and appraisal – traits that they have supposedly acquired through their upbringing and relationships with their parents (Lyons et al., 2010; Martin, 2005; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Nonetheless, Millennials identify pay as the most important motivational factor and believe that it reflects their perceived value and what they can

achieve (Hite & McDonald, 2012; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). When their expectations are met, they are linked to higher job satisfaction, greater organizational commitment and improved individual performance (Lyons et al., 2010).

In a similar vein, Millennials also have high expectations when it comes to opportunities of advancement; namely, promotions, pay raises, and other occasions for improvement (Lyons et al., 2012). They have identified this desire as the most important work attribute when deciding on an employment opportunity (Lyons et al., 2010). While Millennials tend to be more motivated by career progression than previous generations, it can be argued this is simply a difference in career stage and age difference (Hite & McDonald, 2012). Since they are in the earlier stages of their career, they are more motivated by the possibility of advancement in contrast to Baby Boomers, who are likely preparing for retirement (Hite & McDonald, 2012). Nonetheless, if they believe they could be more successful at another organization, Millennials will not hesitate to switch workplaces (Lester et al., 2012). In fact, a major shift from past career norms is that most Millennials would agree that organizational commitment is a very low priority (Lyons et al., 2010). In a study done by Lyons et al. (2012), Millennials reported a significantly higher number of job and organizational changes per year than their senior generations. In respect to organizational learning, this creates an interesting challenge for the transfer of knowledge.

Millennials are also driven by meaningful work experiences that better the world as well as working with committed colleagues who share similar values (Eisner, 2005). It is important that their values not only align with their co-workers, but also with the organization and its practices (Lyons et al., 2010). This translates into organizations that are socially responsible, inclusive of diversity, and contributing to society (Eisner, 2005). Ultimately, Millennials are looking for an organization that can help them lead a more purposeful life (Eisner, 2005). This

character is also embodied by Generation X; however, is significantly less important to Baby Boomers (Lyons et al., 2010).

Lastly, Millennials value a work environment that is nurturing and emphasizes a strong social component (Lyons et al., 2010). This generation is described as independent, individualistic, self-reliant, and at the same time, collaborative, team-oriented, and extremely social (Martin, 2005; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Therefore, they prefer working with colleagues in a communal setting and alongside their supervisors, with whom they can relate and share openly (Lester et al., 2012). This also manifests itself in a desire for freedom and to complete tasks in their own way, at their own pace (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Nonetheless, Millennials undoubtedly value an environment where they can continuously learn and obtain consistent and constant feedback from their leaders (Lester et al., 2012). This is attributed to an emphasis that both educators and parents have reinforced on education and the need to expand and retain marketable skills (Lester et al., 2012). As a result, Millennials are eager to seize any opportunity to enrich their personal or professional development (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

Considering the above, it is clear Millennials experience various organizational features, such as learning, in a different way than previous generations. While Millennials share some similar traits and values with Baby Boomers and Generation X, they are working in a very different environment than the generations that precede them (Twenge & Campbell, 2012). As a result, these characteristics are manifested in a unique way (Hite & McDonald, 2012). The literature in the preceding paragraphs has led me to develop the theoretical framework below (see Appendix 1) that will inform the research questions that follow.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Overall the reviewed literature demonstrates the dynamic and connected nature of organizational learning and other organizational elements including culture, sensemaking, and intergenerational communication. Considering the current state of the organizational climate, strategic renewal is positioned as the domain of interest and adopts Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework of learning as the basis of this study. The interplay of this model mirrors the true character of organizational learning as it accounts for the constant and simultaneous transition of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing across the individual, group, and organizational levels. Crossan et al. (1999) not only account for its cyclical nature but also argue the tension that results from exploration and exploitation is what drives the strategic renewal of the organization.

Therefore, it is argued that organizational culture is distinguished as a key mechanism of support for organizational learning. In fact, for learning to be effective and successful, knowledge and an appreciation for learning must be integrated at all three levels of culture. Likewise, a thriving learning culture is one that empowers its employees to learn at the deepest and unconscious level of underlying assumptions.

Furthermore, as a means of better comprehending organizational learning, Weick's (1995) vision of sensemaking is chosen as the leading definition. His impression has been included in the following theoretical framework to better grasp the context in which learning occurs and the role of sensemaking throughout Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework. Furthermore, sensemaking is a critical component of negotiating identity and thus, will be vital during data collection as Millennials recount their experience with learning.

Grasping generational theory and its complexities is an important foundation for studying the Millennial generation. Mannheim's (1952) theoretical framework is built upon using the supporting definitions of cohort-based, age-based, and incumbency-based identity. This helps discern how members of a generation come to identify with a particular group and the associated values, characteristics, and behaviours.

Crucial to organizational learning is the transfer of knowledge that requires a shared meaning and understanding between two parties. When this occurs between individuals of separate generations, communication becomes critical to successfully learn, especially during the phase of interpreting. An underlying theme that has been present throughout the course of this chapter is the social disposition of organizational learning and the role of communication. It manifests itself during the phases of learning, in the levels of culture, during sensemaking, and most importantly through navigating generational diversity. Hence, realizing the unique attributes of the Millennial generation is key to ensuring successful interaction and learning within the context of the workplace. In sum, Millennials are characterized by increasing diversity, globalization, rapid technological advancement as well as economic, socio, and political instability (Burke & Ng, 2006; Lyons et al., 2012; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). As a result, they are known as digital natives, socially conscious, and have greater expectations for the workplace (Eisner, 2005; Hite & McDonald, 2012; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

The theoretical framework (see Appendix 1) will not only be considered when drafting the interview questions and conducting the interviews themselves, but it will also be practiced during the data analysis phase. This will help identify patterns and thus lead to a solid understanding of the nuances Millennials face when learning in an organizational context. Applying this theoretical framework will also help explore the following research questions.

RQ1: How do Millennials experience organizational learning?

RQ2: How do Millennials cope with the challenges they face while learning?

RQ3: How do Millennials apply the knowledge acquired through learning?

2.6 Summary

With the intention of providing readers with a solid foundation upon which to build this study, Chapter Two shed light on the process of organizational learning, organizational culture, sensemaking as well as generational identity, intergenerational communication, and the various generations. Specifically, the dynamic process of organizational learning and how it relates to other important organizational practices and generational variables was identified and connections were drawn amongst the various constructs. This chapter also outlined the theoretical framework and research questions that will drive the thesis forward.

The principle objectives of the thesis are a two-fold. First, I will investigate how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning. Second, the significance of these findings will be determined with the intention of understanding how they impact the future of learning in the workplace. This thesis will contribute to the literature by focusing specifically on the process of organizational learning from the standpoint of the Millennial generation. Obtaining this kind of information is critical for comprehending the influence of generations, and Millennials in particular, on the strategic renewal of the organization. In the next chapter, a justification for the research methodology, data collection, and analysis will be provided.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

With the intentions of building an extensive audit trail, this chapter will provide a thorough account of the methodology and research design of this study as well as the role of the researcher as an instrument during both the data collection and analysis processes. This section will first outline why a qualitative approach was adopted followed by the details pertaining to the sampling strategy, participants, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis. Lastly, I will discuss validation strategies and ethical considerations as they pertain to this thesis.

3.1 Qualitative Methods

As the foundation of this study, I used qualitative methods due to their ability to produce robust and contextual findings using rich, nuanced, and detailed data (Mason, 2002). Qualitative research is not an established set of techniques or philosophies; rather, it has grown from a wide range of disciplines and schools of thought (Mason, 2002). It is commonly used to explore how the social world is interpreted, experienced, and produced thereby making it a well-suited method to investigate how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning (Mason, 2002). In contrast to quantitative research, which follows a rigid or standardized structure, qualitative research is both flexible and sensitive to the context in which the data is generated (Creswell, 2009). Central to qualitative research is the notion of active reflexivity (Yin, 2011). This means that as the researcher, I must play a dynamic role and think critically about each decision, challenge my own assumptions, and recognize the extent to which my own lens shapes the study (Mason, 2002).

Although qualitative research stems from a variety of schools, it is most commonly associated to the interpretivist sociological tradition (Mason, 2002). Considering the research questions outlined in Chapter Two, I am interested in qualitative research as it derives from

phenomenology. Specifically, I have employed a general phenomenological perspective as a means of justifying the chosen methods of inquiry. A phenomenological perspective is used to attain a profound understanding of the nature or meaning of lived experiences (Patton, 2002). By adopting such a perspective, my purpose is to use methods that capture Millennials' experience of learning. Next, I will discuss the strategies used to sample participants and collect data through semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Research Design

Data was collected from a single medium sized organization, Company X, as a means of exploring and explaining how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning, the succeeding challenges they face, and their motivations. Participants were selected through a purposive sample and then interviewed using an in-depth semi-structured format. A thorough thematic analysis was then completed.

3.2.1 Sampling Strategy. In line with the nature of this research and the chosen methodology, participants were selected through purposive sampling. Considering this thesis is reliant on knowledge that is privy to the Millennial generation, the goal was not to randomly select units but rather to use a subgroup of purposive, specifically homogenous, sampling. A homogenous sample is a group of people who share similar characteristics or traits such as age, gender, race, or background (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The purpose of using such a sample is to grasp an in-depth understanding of a particular subgroup (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the homogeneous factor in this research are the bounding dates of the Millennial generation (1981-2000) and the ensuing attributes.

3.2.2 Participants. Participants were recruited directly through a letter sent to the Director of Talent, Employee Engagement and Diversity at Company X (see Appendix 2) who

then distributed the call to action throughout the organization. Interested candidates were instructed to contact the researcher directly to avoid any possible implications with their employer. Participants were selected subject to their classification as a Millennial (born between 1981-2000) and their exposure to learning in their daily work environment. They were also chosen on a first come basis.

Given the nature of this study, participants were asked to fill out a demographic information sheet (see Appendix 3) prior to the interview. This was done with the intentions of collecting basic information, such as gender and date of birth, which could become relevant during the analysis. Beyond that, no additional personal details were collected which could otherwise lead to potentially identifying the participants. Since the data did not require personal information, anonymity was offered to all respondents as well as the organization using pseudonyms during the report writing phase. Next, I acquired participants' signed consent using the consent form found in Appendix 4, which was reviewed with each individual prior to the interview. Participants were also advised that the research was being conducted independent from the organization; therefore, choosing whether to participate would have no effect on the relationship with their employer.

A total of five men and eight women took part in the study to equal 13 participants; thus, aligning with the number of interviews recommended for a phenomenological inquiry. According to this paradigm, it is suggested that a sample consist of at least six (Morse, 1994) or between five and 25 (Creswell, 2009) interviews. However, there are no specific rules for sample sizes in qualitative research (Patton, 2002); rather, it depends on the breadth and depth of the inquiry.

3.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews. Once the sampling strategy was established and the participants were chosen, data was collected through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The flexibility of this interview format allows conversations to be loosely guided using an interview protocol, open-ended questions, and a series of probes. This is done in the interest of achieving in-depth responses and uncovering various themes.

Other forms of qualitative interviewing include, but are not limited to, structured interviews, open-ended unstructured interviews, and focus groups. Structured interviews are a one-on-one form of interviewing that is organized around a set of established, direct questions that elicit a limited number of responses (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In contrast, open-ended unstructured interviews take place in an open context in which the researcher and participant have a broad degree of flexibility and freedom in terms of orchestrating the interview content and questions (Platt, 2001). Focus groups are a form of interview where a sample of a specific population is selected and grouped together to convene on a given topic (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). This is done with the intentions of gaining insights into the opinions and views that cannot be accessed during individual interviews (Barbour & Schostak, 2005).

Ultimately, semi-structured interviews are the best fit for this research since it is a practical and efficient way of collecting data such as emotions and perceptions that cannot easily be observed thus allowing existing themes to emerge through dialogue. Other advantages of this technique include the flexibility of when and how questions are presented, the openness for participants to answer in their own terms, and the opportunity to discuss and clarify complex questions (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Edwards & Holland, 2013).

When conducting semi-structured interviews, it is recommended that a protocol be developed in advance to guide the interview process, prioritize research questions, and ensure

consistency (Creswell, 2009). This guide contains a subset of topics, open-ended questions, and probes to produce a guided conversation (Yin, 2011). Nonetheless, the structure of the interview guide varies depending on the researcher. Some include carefully crafted questions while others simply list topics to be followed (Ayres, 2008b). In either case, the topics that direct the interview protocol are based on the research question and are intended to lead the conversation without implying a fixed response (Ayres, 2008b).

With this in mind, I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix 5) with a distinct series of questions and sub-questions. While these were carefully crafted, I often moved back and forth throughout the list and rephrased questions depending on the informant's response. By using an interview protocol, I could build on a topic when necessary, establish a conversational style, and use my time strategically by deciding in advance the topics that would be covered (Patton, 2002).

Open-ended questions are another defining characteristic of semi-structured interviews and are typical in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2013). By phrasing questions in an open-ended manner, participants could respond in their own words. This gives the researcher the opportunity to learn from what has been said in a way that is meaningful to the participant and expressed using their own cognitive constructs (Guest et al., 2013). An additional benefit is that the researcher can guide the conversation based on what has just been learned (Guest et al., 2013).

As a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews are in-depth in that they provide comprehensive information about the participants' inner beliefs, values, and opinions. Given the phenomenological nature of this study, the open-ended and descriptive character of in-depth interviews was fitting for capturing this level of human experience (Guest et al., 2013).

Phenomenology focuses on “describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The decision to use this format of interviewing allowed Millennials to share their sense of organizational learning. In turn, a deeper understanding of the experience was achieved. This also relates to the process of sensemaking as defined in Chapter Two. As learners, Millennials produce sensemaking while talking about their experience.

Researchers also use a variety of follow-up questions, or probes, during semi-structured interviews to elicit a more in-depth response or follow up on a topic of interest (Ayres, 2008b). The main goal in doing so is to increase the richness and depth of the respondents answer (Guest et al., 2013). This is an essential skill that comes from listening carefully to both what is said and is not, knowing what to pay close attention to and being aware of the feedback needs of the participant (Patton, 2002). It is important to note that probes are both verbal and non-verbal; therefore, silence and what is not said can be equally as insightful as verbal cues (Patton, 2002).

Depending on the purpose of the research, there are also different types of probes that can be used. These include detail-oriented probes, elaboration probes, clarification probes and contrast probes. A detail-oriented probe is used to fill in the details of an experience or response through questions such as *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* (Patton, 2002). An elaboration probe is used to encourage the respondent to keep talking about a subject by either gently nodding or using verbal cues such as *uh-huh* or “can you say more about that” (Patton, 2002). As its name suggests, a clarification probe is used by the researcher to obtain clarification on something ambiguous that has been said (Patton, 2002). This could include a statement such as “you said the onboarding process was challenging. What do you mean by ‘challenging’?” Lastly, a contrast probe is often used to position something the respondent has said against something

else to help define the boundaries of their response (Patton, 2002). For example, “how does experience X compare to experience Y?” The above probes were each exercised during the data collection to provide guidance to the person being interviewed (Patton, 2002). They also serve as an instrument to maintain the flow of the conversation (Patton, 2002).

The framework and characteristics of semi-structured interviews fit within the research design of this study since it is flexible and open-ended; therefore, conversation was able to flow and themes could to emerge. This allowed participants to discuss their interpretation and experience with organizational learning all the while allowing myself to probe into certain topics. Next, I will discuss the details on how the data was gathered and prepared for analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

To commence the data collection phase, 13 semi-structured interviews were set up with participants in a private meeting space at Company X headquarters. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour and with the participants’ permission, interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Open-ended questions and a series of probes were used thus covering a wide range of themes. This led to a better understanding of learning in the context of the workplace and from the perspective of the Millennial. Additionally, each participant contributed under the condition that their insights would remain anonymous and that no identifying information could be attributed. Following each interview, I took well-rounded notes documenting certain observations and themes to return to during the process of analysis.

Later, recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, therefore producing approximately 12 to 39 transcribed pages per participant. The detailed transcriptions, in addition to the recordings, helped reconstruct the interviews themselves thus acting as a crucial tool throughout the analysis and discussion writing phase. Furthermore, this data became a part of the audit trail,

thereby reinforcing the trustworthiness. I will now review thematic analysis as it is used within this study.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

With the intentions of facilitating the search for patterns of experience and systematically deriving meaning from the collected data, I carried out a thematic analysis (Ayres, 2008a; Schreier, 2014). Ultimately, this is a form of content analysis. It is also a descriptive strategy achieved by pairing successive parts of the data with accompanying categories of the coding frame (Schreier, 2014). A theme can be conceptualized as having an internal connected nature such as a relationship between units in the form of actions, propositions, beliefs, narrative, or more (Ayres, 2008a). Furthermore, this method is characterized by and was chosen because of three specific features: it reduces data, it is systematic, and it is flexible.

Given the amount of data collected following the interviews, it was necessary to reduce the material into a set of common themes in the interest of focusing on selected aspects of meaning that directly pertain to the research question (Schreier, 2014). In doing so, the number of aspects was limited to the amount of coding categories. Although each passage differed from another within the same grouping, they share a higher level of meaning (Schreier, 2014). In the end, there were a limited number of categories under which several passages could be grouped.

In light of the depth and complexity of this research, it was necessary to select a method that is highly systemic and ensures that the material is examined beyond one lens of expectation or assumption. This is to produce a sound analysis and discussion. Thematic analysis accounts for this by examining every piece of material that is in any way akin to the research question. Furthermore, this method is systematic in that a certain series of steps are required despite the research question or material (Schreier, 2014). It is an iterative process whereby the steps are

gone through repeatedly, all the while modifying the coding frame (Schreier, 2014). Nonetheless, the steps themselves and the sequence of the content analysis remain the same (Schreier, 2014). Likewise, the process of coding is the principal systematic trait of this method. Coding must be carried out twice, at least for parts of the data, to guarantee that the category definitions, or the themes, are well determined. In fact, when carrying out the analysis the researcher must ensure that the categories are so well construed that the findings between the first and second coding must be very similar (Schreier, 2014).

Although it is important that thematic analysis be systematic, it must also be flexible. The coding frame must reflect the description of the data; therefore, this method accounts for the flexibility to modify the categories to do just that (Schreier, 2014).

3.4.1 Coding. There are multiple categorization strategies; however, the most widely employed in qualitative research is coding. This is used in thematic analysis and is the process of labeling and combining data by category followed by examining and comparing the material both within and between groupings (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). The technique of coding and sorting data then creates a similarity-based ordering of the material based on the themes (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

Thematic coding is a strategy of data reduction whereby the data is segmented and categorized by common themes that derive from both implicit and explicit content within the data (Guest et al., 2013). This sort of coding occurs in a perpetual manner whereby the data is decontextualized from the original interviews and then recontextualized into a category thus demonstrating that themes are seldom static and never perfect (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Therefore, it can be argued that during the analysis the themes will constantly be challenged through a search for alternative interpretations or opposing evidence (Ayres, 2008a).

3.5 Data Analysis

In the interest of performing a thorough thematic analysis, the following steps were completed: building a coding frame, segmentation, trial coding, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, and lastly, the main analysis (Guest et al., 2013; Schreier, 2014). Using this approach, the categories were defined using a name, a description, positive examples, and coding rules (Schreier, 2014). Once the categories were profiled, they were revised and expanded on repeatedly until the coding frame did a complete job of covering the material.

A sample of the data was then segmented into units by dividing the material in such a way that it fit exactly one category or subcategory of the coding frame. It is important to ensure coding consistency; therefore, the units were delineated using thematic criterion to determine where each segment begins and ends. This entailed looking for a topic change thus matching one unit to a single theme.

Next the material was prepared for the pilot phase whereby the coding frame was applied to a sample of the data during two distinct rounds of coding, once again to ensure consistency. Although this was the preliminary stage, this same procedure would later be mimicked during the main coding. Following the initial coding, the frame must be evaluated and modified. This was done by examining the results of the trial to ensure consistency and validity. If units were placed in separate (sub)categories during the two rounds, this indicated an overlap between codes or a gap in the definitions and thus, revisions were made where necessary. All the while, the relationship between the categories and the context in which they emerged is considered. This is to ensure that the data that has been decontextualized during the coding process can still retain its connection to its source (Ayres, 2008a). This is also the distinguishing feature between thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis.

As the first step in the main analysis, the remaining body of material was segmented according to the same thematic criterion and then double-coded in line with the final coding frame. Lastly, the results were entered into the coding sheet, any inconsistencies were resolved, and the sheet was prepared in a manner suitable for answering the research question.

The product of a thematic analysis is not the collection of a set of themes and their accompanying descriptions; rather, it is important that the final output include the common patterns across respondents as well as the contextual aspects that account for the differences between their answers (Ayres, 2008a). I will now discuss the role of the researcher as an instrument in this qualitative study.

3.6 Researcher's Role

Qualitative research is interpretive by its very nature (Creswell, 2009). One of its leading strengths is that the investigator acts as the main instrument, playing a highly reflexive and interactive role when approaching the concepts, data collection, and analysis (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2017; Yin, 2011). Considering the innate structure of semi-structured interviews, I thereby act as the main interpreter and have an interactive function. Furthermore, in the majority of qualitative research, the collection and analysis phase occur in tandem thus highlighting the inherent nature of constant discovery and comparison (Altheide, 1996). For instance, during semi-structured interviews the researcher is making analytic choices by deciding when to use probes, shift topics, or modify an original protocol to acquire new detail or accommodate new revelations (Yin, 2011). Therefore, this function involves making observations, exercising sound subjective judgement, and especially being mindful of personal consciousness (Harrison et al., 2017).

By virtue of its design, qualitative research is heavily associated to direct observation and interaction; therefore, as a key instrument, the researcher brings a particular lens to the data collection and analysis (Yin, 2011). As a researcher, it is important that I acknowledge any features of my own lens that in any way may be akin to this thesis. The most prominent circumstance is that I am a Millennial therefore I fall into the same generational category as each of the participants. While gathering and analyzing the data, I maintained a self-reflexive awareness as being a part of the same generation that is at the core of this study. This meant acknowledging that we share cognitive constructs and at times harnessing this actuality to build a connection, rephrase a question, or probe strategically. Likewise, considering we were of the same generation and discussing experiences as they pertain to Millennials, participants felt they could divulge information without being judged. Arguably, this fear comes from other generations being quick to dismiss or stereotype Millennials and their work ethic (Kuron et al., 2015). Nonetheless, as I was analyzing the data I was mindful of any biases to avoid breaching the validity of this study or creating a manifesto about the Millennial generation. Therefore, it is important that I recognize that although I took the necessary precautions to remain objective, my own lens as a Millennial may at times be apparent. Next, I will establish the validation strategies that establish this study's trustworthiness.

3.7 Validation Strategies

The competency of a qualitative study is evaluated based on the “paradigmatic underpinning of the research and the standards of the discipline” (Morrow, 2005, p. 250). Therefore, depending on the discipline of the study and the paradigm it is rooted in, the standard for evaluating the caliber of the qualitative research will vary accordingly. This is known commonly as the validity, credibility, trustworthiness, or rigor of a research study (Morrow,

2005). This thesis is fixed deeply in naturalistic inquiry and adopts a phenomenological perspective, especially when assessing the validation of this qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). In line with this realm of research is the paradigm-specific concept of trustworthiness and the four criteria for judging the quality of such a study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As determined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is the most important factor in establishing trustworthiness and refers to the truth value of the findings. Several provisions can be made to ensure credibility including, but not limited to, triangulation, thick description, and researcher reflexivity (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings are applicable beyond the context of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability refers to the core issue of how the study can be repeated to show the findings are consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A provision in this case is the careful tracking of the research design, audit trail, and influences and thus including an in-depth description of the methodology (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Finally, confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are built on the respondents and not the biases or motivations of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although these four elements are fundamental to establishing a standard, Guba (1981) warns that the perfect criteria will likely never be determined and instead, these should be used as a general guideline (Morrow, 2005). With this in mind, trustworthiness was established by using each of the four criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Next, I will discuss the ethical considerations and approval process of this study.

3.8 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Ottawa on December 7, 2016 (see Appendix 6). Participants were contacted between January 27

and February 8, 2017 and interviews were then conducted between February 16 and March 3, 2017. As previously mentioned, no identifying information was disclosed in the research and the answers provided by participants remain completely anonymous.

3.9 Summary

Chapter Three outlined the fundamental characteristics of qualitative research as the foundation of this study followed by the research design that was executed to gather and analyze data. It was determined that using homogeneous sampling, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the intentions of uncovering emotions and individual perceptions. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis with the objective of allowing existing themes to emerge and drawing sound conclusions.

The role of the researcher was then expanded upon and the ethical considerations were presented. Lastly, the notion of trustworthiness and its function as a validation strategy were established. The four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be maintained throughout this thesis from the data collection phase to the analysis and subsequent discussion. In the next chapter, the findings will be presented.

Chapter 4: Findings

The data analysis phase began following the transcription of the semi-structured interviews. To address the research questions, a thematic analysis was completed using a spreadsheet to create an index of relevant themes. The interview data was double-coded and prepared in a suitable manner through multiple iterations of coding to condense the central list of categories. During the pilot phase, a robust coding frame was prepared, revised, and expanded upon to equal a total of 28 themes. The initial codes were then evaluated and modified to see which themes best fit together thus reducing the list to 12 themes and various sub-themes. In the final iteration of coding, the categories were further condensed into five primary themes and renamed as *learning is essential*, *self-learning*, *communication*, *reflection*, and finally, *challenges*. The following paragraphs explore the results of the in-depth semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Theme One: Learning is essential

During interviews, participants were asked to speak to whether learning is important to them in the context of the organization. The result was unanimous; however, they identified various reasons as to why. Theme one, *learning is essential*, has been organized into five sub-themes, including *learning and improvement*, *succeeding in a new role*, *learning as a motivator*, *learning as an enabler of change*, and *investing in a learning culture*.

4.1.1 Learning and improvement. It became clear early in the data collection that many participants directly associate learning and being able to advance in their career. Among these respondents, learning as a means of obtaining new knowledge, thus improving, was cited as the predominant way of achieving just that. Participant Six indicated that if you are not acquiring new skills or knowledge related to your profession, then you will fall behind and eventually start

moving backwards in your role. Participant Six is a 32-year-old male who has been at Company X for seven months but has worked in the industry for over a decade. He is a training specialist with no post-secondary education.

“I’ve had colleagues see me in my free time doing the online modules. They’re like, ‘Oh my, I don’t bother doing that. It’s boring.’ Okay. Well, you know, I don’t want to be in this role for the next 10 years of my life. I’m here because I want to move up. I like paying my mortgage, but that’s not enough, you know? It’s forwards or backwards. There’s no sitting still really” said Participant Six.

This was a common statement among participants who believe that as an employee you have two simple choices that determine how your career will progress. Participant Five expressed that if you choose the latter, then at the very best you will stay stagnant within the workplace.

Participant Five is a 31-year-old female who currently holds a managerial role in the Human Resources department and has been at the organization for nine years. “If I want to do something and learn something new, I’m going to push myself. I think it’s equally important to be challenged by your role because otherwise I think you just stay stagnant” said Participant Five.

Participants recognized Millennials, including themselves, as being committed to learning especially with the intent of obtaining a higher position in the organization. Given his role, Participant Eight could especially attest to this statement. Participant Eight is a 27-year-old male who has been at Company X for five years, most of which have been spent working directly with the president of the organization. Participant Eight discussed a common stereotype that Millennials supposedly feel they deserve a higher status without earning their stripes.

“We entrust this seniorocratic and ageist philosophy that if you haven’t earned your stripes by working for 20 years, you’re not respected. If you’re promoted,

you'll be promoted out of order. Like, it's ridiculous. The fact that those attitudes prevail in management is quite frustrating” elaborated Participant Eight.

Participant Nine argued against this same stereotype and added that Millennials will settle for a junior position because they appreciate that there is still a lot to learn. Nonetheless, they are very committed to learning and as a result they grow more quickly than colleagues that had been there longer. Participant Nine is a 28-year-old female who has worked in Human Resources supporting various departments for four years.

Participants were also quick to acknowledge that learning is an endless process. At no instance does an employee know all that they could know, nor should they be satisfied with the limited knowledge they possess at a single point in time. For example, Participant Thirteen indicated “I only know maybe one percent of what I could know.” Participant Thirteen is a 26-year-old female who has worked at the organization as an internal consultant for the past two years. Participant Two also stated that from the “very day you begin, up until the very day you end, you keep learning; you keep learning new things and it's only understandable since we are living in a fast-paced world.” Participant Two is a 20-year-old male who has been working on a short-term contract in the Human Resources department for the past five months. Given that organizations reside in a fast-paced environment, employees should continue to learn as a way of improving and remaining well-informed.

4.1.2 Succeeding in a new role. More specifically, participants cited learning as essential to succeeding in a new role. When a new job incumbent begins a position, there is a period of transition where they must adapt to their environment and responsibilities. Participant Four referred to this period as the learning curve; to succeed, members must learn more efficiently and at a quicker speed than is anticipated by the curve. Participant Four is a 32-year-old female who

has worked for Company X for seven years, most of which have been spent as a manager in various departments. Her current role is as a strategist for the maintenance side of operations.

In fact, Participant One indicated that “the first year on the job is just learning and nothing else. I mean you're doing things here and there but realistically in every position I've ever had, the first year has always just been to try to learn everything and building confidence.” There will be minor responsibilities and projects with close supervision; however, in their experience the initial year is meant to encounter everything at least once and absorb as much knowledge as possible. Participant One is a 31-year-old male who has worked at the organization for seven years. He holds a Bachelor’s degree and is currently a senior manager in the loyalty department. “It is learning who your people are and getting the information you need to be able to support your needs” said Participant Five. As such, the participants expressed that not only is learning necessary to become acquainted with a position, but it is also crucial to thrive at their job and build confidence.

4.1.3 Learning as a motivator. In addition to learning as a means of improving and succeeding, participants also identified learning as a principal motivator for them in the workplace. Having worked in a variety of roles, Participant Twelve indicated that when they are not learning, they are bored and unproductive. Participant Twelve is a 29-year-old female who began at Company X at the age of 18. She has no post-secondary education and now holds a specialized support role. “Nobody wants to be stuck somewhere where it's boring and you're just not learning anything. Where is the fun in that?” said Participant Twelve. Likewise, Participant Nine expressed that they need to be challenged to be stimulated and this occurs in tandem with interpreting what they have learned. Thus, without learning, Millennials at Company X are not inspired nor driven in their career.

Nonetheless, when they are motivated by learning, they become engaged with their colleagues and enthusiastic about their role. Participant Four recalled an example of learning alongside the Vice-President. Participant Four went on to say that they felt invested in the organization following that experience, and that it motivated them to share their knowledge and seek new learning opportunities.

4.1.4 Learning as an enabler of change. Participants also identified learning as necessary given its capacity to act as an enabler of change. Change is considered crucial to an organization for it to evolve and remain competitive; therefore, learning is described as critical to this process. Participant Eight discussed this relationship in the context of Company X, pointing out that Millennials understand the need for change, while other colleagues, many of whom happen to be of senior generations, tend to be resistant. Other participants supported this claim by acknowledging that employees who had been at the organization for many years are likely to reject learning when it is obviously connected to a shift of any sort. For instance, Participant Twelve remarked that colleagues that are similar in age are often the ones that attempt to implement what they have learned whereas “the people who have been there for 20, 30 years” are set in their ways. Citing a divide among the employees, the participant goes on to say, “I’ve worked with people who are very resistant to change and I’ve worked with people who are very open to it, and I tend to lean more towards the people who are open towards it”.

When it comes to coping with this resistance, Participant Four suggested that explaining to people why it could be improved and giving concrete and logical explanations to sway their opinion and help educate why change is necessary. “If you explain to people why and how we could do it better, if you can give them something concrete and logical to make a decision off of, then you might improve the way decisions are actually being made” said Participant Four.

Participant Twelve explained there has been progress in this regard and as a result, there have been “a lot of good, positive changes.”

4.1.5 Investing in a learning culture. In addition to the preceding themes, participants indicated that since learning is considered essential by so many, it is important that the organization nurture and invest in a learning culture. Participants identified a shift in the culture over the past years that concentrate on open communication and learning; however, they admit that such a culture has not been embraced across the entire organization. Participant Eleven expressed that many employees have adopted a new mindset regarding learning, whereas others are simply not interested. Participant Eleven is a 28-year-old female who has been at Company X for seven years and holds a managerial position in the Finance department.

On the other hand, many participants recalled initiatives to inspire learning that they felt were effective. Participant Seven and Participant Thirteen focused on changes made primarily to the Human Resources department and the physical design of the organization. Most notably, they mentioned that a move to an open-concept office has encouraged sharing and unrestricted communication between employees. Participant Nine discussed an investment in learning and development; specifically, several online courses on a wide variety of topics. Other participants detailed a point system that can be used to award colleagues for achievements such as accomplishing a difficult project. “They’re called shine points. If somebody does something nice for you, instead of just sending them a thank you, you send them that thank you and a few little shine points and it makes their day. They’re sort of like air miles that they can cash in” said Participant Twelve. Initiatives such as these have inspired learning all the while nurturing a connection between the employee and the organization.

4.2 Theme Two: Self-learning

Participants also dictate their own path in regard to learning. Theme two, *self-learning*, clarifies how this is accomplished through two sub-themes including *self-reliant and resourceful*, and *dependent on senior employees as a source of knowledge*.

4.2.1 Self-reliant and resourceful. At Company X, the employees are responsible for the career they want to pursue. Participants were told early on that they are the ones to determine their own course and they should simply ask if they require any development or assistance to achieve their goals. Considering Millennials directly associate learning with career advancement, this often translates into taking learning into their own hands. For instance, Participant One indicated that “it very much depends on your own initiative and being able to make your own web of contacts to get the information you think you require in the job.” Many respondents share this mentality, with some explicitly stating that otherwise you will not learn. Participant Eight expressed that it should go beyond a need to know only the basics. “There's a level of curiosity, not just to finish the task, but also to have a better understanding of why things work or why things happen the way they do.”

Ultimately, participants indicated that to learn, you must be self-reliant. “It is based on the expectation that you'll just get ahead of the curve on your own” said Participant One. The participant goes on to say that there is little direction in the beginning therefore you must be self-motivated and have a drive to learn. Participant Eleven attributed this mentality to the fact that employees fluctuate between roles and as a result there is little time to adequately transfer knowledge. “I've had to teach myself almost everything because the people I've replaced also moved on to a different role. Everyone kind of has to jump into the new role and doesn't have that much time to train” described Participant Eleven.

All of this considered, participants noted they are increasingly resourceful. Participant One indicated that it is a matter of learning on the job and accessing both internal and external sources. “It's learning on the job, it's being able to find the blogs or the newsletters or know the sources. You just get up to speed on your own” said Participant Five. Likewise, Participant Five acknowledged that “if I don't know who to go to get the information, I won't succeed in my role.” Participants indicated they often encounter unique situations that require a variety of sources to adequately interpret the new knowledge. Participant Nine expressed that “it's dealing in the gray zone all the time. There's no black and white.” The participant continued to point out that when this is the case, various formal and informal resources should be consulted. These include handbooks, old documents and Google. Additionally, each participant identified their colleagues as the most valuable source of knowledge. This will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

4.2.2 Dependent on senior employees as a source of knowledge. Of each of the themes identified by participants, the most prominent was the extent to which they depend on senior employees as a source of knowledge. They described senior employees as a means of acquiring new information as well as a key tool in the process of interpreting. While most respondents cited their direct superior as their primary support, many argued that it is a matter of having multiple contacts and connecting with the appropriate individual. Participant Seven argued that “finding the right person is sometimes a challenge.” They not only want to connect with the person who has the right information, but also the individual who will use the correct terminology and ensure the information is being interpreted properly. Participant Seven is a 32-year-old female who has worked at the organization for 12 years. She has held many lead roles as a strategist and has completed a Master's degree.

Participant Eight was quick to note that it is also a matter of finding someone who is willing to share. They attributed their success in this regard to their social relationships and building a rapport with their colleagues. “It's talking to other people. It's these social relationships you can develop that allowed me to fuel questions to the right people - who hopefully don't mind answering” described the participant.

Many participants also acknowledged the benefits of job shadowing and unofficial mentors. Job shadowing was cited as the main means of acquiring knowledge as a new job incumbent. Participants recounted being paired with colleagues or a supervisor for a short period of time to become acquainted with a role. Participant One described meeting with relevant stakeholders whereas Participant Five discussed asking an abundance of questions, becoming familiar with relevant software and learning how to manage every day operations.

“I learn a lot from my colleagues, I ask for advice. I've been fortunate to have a very strong manager, very early in my career in HR, who coached me, mentored me, and pushed me. A lot of my learning would come from having that type of mentor” said Participant Five.

While most participants liked this practice, Participant Three was frustrated by simply watching someone. Participant Three is a 25-year-old female who has been at Company X for three years and was recently promoted to a managerial position. She was hired following an internship and works in the Employee Engagement department. The participant instead suggested that it should be a combination of shadowing and actually doing the work. In fact, this blend of the two is representative of other participants' experience. Following the period of job shadowing, participants indicated that these individuals later became unofficial mentors and/or coaches. As a result, senior employees continue to serve as a major source of knowledge and encouragement throughout their career at Company X.

4.3 Theme Three: Communication

A great deal of information was uncovered when participants were asked to elaborate on the process of learning in the workplace. Theme three, *communication*, captures such information and brings to light four important sub-themes. These include *building a shared understanding*, *open communication*, *face-to-face interactions*, and *feeling comfortable to make mistakes*.

4.3.1 Building a shared understanding. Ultimately, communication is crucial to building a shared understanding between colleagues. Many participants described speaking “a different language” than others since they each come from unique backgrounds.

“I think the difference of background could play a huge role because some people speak a certain language like the engineering language or the finance language. When I say language it's more of the lingo that's being used - the terminologies that are used. And if you don't know the terminologies, then you won't understand what they're saying” described Participant Twelve.

Each language consists not only of its own “lingo, acronyms and terminology” but it also changes the frame of mind of the individual. In consequence, to create a shared understanding, employees must adjust their own mental map to communicate effectively with their colleagues. Otherwise, they risk misunderstanding one another and learning incorrectly. Some participants even refer to themselves as translators. “I usually try to paraphrase and then validate. Is it what you feel? Is it what you understood?” said Participant Seven. As such, participants addressed that being able to communicate effectively between one another is crucial to creating a shared understanding.

4.3.2 Open communication. During the interviews, it became clear that the capacity to communicate openly between colleagues was extremely important to participants. They

attributed their ability to learn and create a shared understanding nearly entirely to open communication. Without the facility to communicate freely among one another, participants felt they would do an inadequate job of learning on their own. As Participant Six indicated, “sharing information is vital for us.” According to Participant Seven, the organization even has an aphorism that supports open communication. “‘Leading the Company X way’ is mostly about communicating” stated the participant. This is often reminded to employees during crucial and difficult moments.

Participant Three also described the office layout as supporting open and accessible communication. Employees are seated in cubicles grouped in fours and especially close to one another. While they have their own private space, they are also able to speak among themselves without moving from their desk. For example, Participant Four indicated that they will often be heard yelling from their seat asking for information or help. Participant Thirteen added that they are normally grouped based on their knowledge and role. Participant Thirteen went on to detail how they love this arrangement and how they can ask questions all the while staying at their station.

“Our desks are very close with one another, we are kind of in a square that cuts in four and they are there, I am here. We're able to see each other and when we're even seated, we can ask each other questions. I get asked questions quite often and I encourage them to do that too because that's how I still learn” said Participant Thirteen.

This also supports informal communication since employees can converse throughout the day, build social relationships and ask for help in the moment. Participant One stated that “the fact that we're all here, we're all very close. A lot of it is just hallway talk.” This eliminates the need for scheduled meetings to work through, what may be, just a single question. Additionally, this

encourages learning and the sharing of information in an informal, yet extremely important, manner.

While discussing open communication, participants kept considering it in the context of asking questions. Many participants felt that as they progressed through the process of learning, they would reach a point where they needed assistance from someone else. Some participants directly referred to this as creating a shared understanding. The opportunity to speak freely among colleagues meant they could ask questions without feeling as if they were disturbing anyone. Participant Eleven indicated this was extremely helpful when they began their role.

4.3.3 Face-to-face interactions. Participants identified face-to-face interactions as the most ideal means of communicating with the intent of creating a shared understanding. Millennials are often described as preferring mediated communication and while that may be true in certain circumstances, participants argued it is not always the case. For instance, Participant Three described taking “any opportunity to go and meet my colleagues in person because, first of all, the communication is way more efficient. You get to know the person and it clarifies a lot.” During face-to-face interactions, it is easier to converse back and forth and each party can read the body language of the other. This helps ease the process of learning.

Participants also expressed a preference for face-to-face interactions because they could use visual support to create a shared understanding. Participant Nine recalled having a difficult time communicating through e-mail as opposed to in person. While e-mailing back and forth, images were often added as attachments and then described in the body of the e-mail. The participant indicated this would become confusing and frustrating rather quickly. In contrast, using visual support during face-to-face communication was seamless and efficient.

4.3.4 Feeling comfortable to make mistakes. Participants attributed open communication as to why they feel comfortable making mistakes. Most participants indicated a connection between the ease of speaking freely, building strong relationships and knowing that it would be okay if there was an error or oversight. “There's no tension between you and your superiors which really makes it easy for you to approach them and then also to make some mistakes” described Participant Two. This is important given learning is not always accurate nor successful. Therefore, participants felt comforted that they could make a mistake without the fear of serious repercussions.

Many participants indicated that learning through trial and error can sometimes be equally as effective as other means. Nonetheless, to learn in this fashion, employees must have the support of their supervisor. “Fortunately, I don't work with somebody who is going to tear your head off for making a mistake” said Participant Eight while recounting an experience of their own. Participants expressed that learning this way meant they would not make the same mistake twice. Participant Nine described interpreting something incorrectly and later realizing they had misunderstood once it was too late. Once they corrected their interpretation, they never made the same mistake again.

“I learn more based on practice so I need to touch it to really understand or at the very least, I need to take notes. But honestly, I think it's also learning by making a mistake. Like I did this, this is a mistake. Here's the impact that happened so I'm not going to do this again” said Participant Nine.

In the process of trial and error, communication is especially prevalent during feedback. Without feedback, participants felt they would not be able to correct their actions and improve.

4.4 Theme Four: Reflection

Throughout the entirety of the data collection participants were asked to reflect on their relationship with learning. The interview data obtained for theme four, *reflection*, acknowledges the importance of this process. This theme is organized into three sub-themes: a *combination of methods are used to make sense*, *quicker learning based on the frequency a situation is encountered*, and *institutionalized practices are put in place to help reflect on learning*.

4.4.1 A combination of methods are used to make sense. By asking participants to consider their experience with learning, many of them recognized and directly referred to reflection as a crucial part of making sense. As part of this process, participants explained that they use a combination of methods to help them reflect and understand what they have learned. These methods include techniques to create a shared understanding as well as old documents, internal records, and external sources.

Many participants expressed they are visual learners and techniques such as drawing out the steps or sharing screen captures with colleagues help them understand. Participant Eleven described learning a new protocol and not being able to grasp the sequence. After reflecting on the process on their own, the participant mapped out step-by-step what they understood and shared it with a colleague to confirm it was correct.

“I was having an issue with the process, where I just wasn't understanding the accounting side of it. So, I took the time to map out what I thought I understood and then she took the time to sit with me and literally mapped out step-by-step what she would have done” said Participant Eleven.

Participant Five expressed a similar case and noted that they only resort to visual means to ensure a shared understanding. “That's usually how I work through the differences. It's more having something to go through than just talking” said Participant Five. On another occasion,

Participant Five pointed out this can be difficult at times. Creating a shared understanding using visuals can get confusing if it is a mediated interaction. As a result, this method normally requires a face-to-face encounter.

Other participants indicated that using examples and metaphors is a great way of making sense. Whether it is on their own or with others, participants pointed out making connections between what they have just learned and other familiar experiences helps them work through difficult cases. For example, Participant Twelve recalled learning about operational and capital expenses. To help them understand, their boss compared the two concepts to maintaining the value of a home versus increasing its value.

“At first I didn’t understand so then my manager explained it to me like this:

‘Think about your house. If you are going to paint your house, what is that? Is that increasing the value of your house or is that maintaining your house?’ I said, ‘I was just maintaining it.’ So, he said, ‘Okay then that's an operational expense’” described Participant Twelve.

The participant went on to express that not only did they immediately grasp the concept after that initial explanation, but they still use the comparison when they are working with the terms.

Participants also indicated they often look to the market if they are having trouble understanding. Participant One described an affinity between various companies within the industry. The participant explained they often communicate with one another to help make sense of difficult cases. “Other companies are another big source, sometimes they hold all of the information. Being able to learn how to do different things and how to approach certain problems. There's definitely a lot of that” said Participant One.

In addition to the preceding methods, most of the participants identified Google as a crucial means of making sense. Participant Thirteen even went as far as to say “some days it's

my best friend.” Participants use Google to search for YouTube videos, relevant articles, and helpful advice. Some participants argued Google is sometimes more valuable than official internal sources.

4.4.2 Quicker learning based on the frequency a situation is encountered. Participants indicated that how proficient they are at learning in certain contexts is associated to the frequency a situation is encountered. They expressed that if they come across the same case often, then they can learn more rapidly. For instance, Participant Thirteen noted the first time they encountered a certain situation, it took a significant amount of time to familiarize themselves with the new knowledge. However, when this situation presented itself next, the participant took less time to reflect. As the frequency of the situation increased, the more confident Participant Thirteen felt and the less time it took for them to reflect and react.

Similarly, Participant Five discussed this in the context of producing documents. As part of their role in Human Resources, they are required to write letters specific to the individual and case they are dealing with; therefore, no two letters are the same. Instead of learning recurrently, Participant Five would refer back to similar situations and draft a letter based on that.

“Say I’m drafting a letter of expectation or a letter of discipline, I’ll sometimes refer back to a similar situation that I had to deal with and based on all the experience I’ve acquired, I’ll draft up something that would make sense. I’ll pull up something that I may have worked on in the past and I’ll use it as an example or I’ll sit down and I’ll compare one version versus another” described Participant Five.

Thus, the more often a similar situation was encountered, the more prepared Participant Five was.

In contrast, participants felt that Company X was not adept in this regard. For example, Participant Four described the organization as reactive; therefore, no matter how often a situation is encountered, they “reinvent the wheel each time.” Participant Two added “they just repetitively re-learn the process.” As a result, it takes longer for Company X to react and at times, the same mistakes are made.

4.4.3 Institutionalized practices are put in place to help reflect on learning. To encourage reflection as part of the learning process, Company X has several institutionalized practices in place. Participants described the many activities they engage with regularly to prompt effective and efficient reflection. For example, Participant One indicated while a project is taking place, there are “fairly structured briefing sessions in terms of what we're trying to do. The documentation that goes with it is also pre-templated.” In addition to the actual briefing sessions, the documentation is meant to bring about reflection as it is completed.

On another occasion, Participant One cited bi-annual performance reviews as a prompt for reflection. Each year employees are asked to write their objectives for the upcoming year which is followed by a meeting with their supervisor. Half-way through the year, they will meet again to discuss their progress. While these reviews are meant to evaluate the actual performance of the employee, Participant One expressed they are inherently related to their experience with learning. As such, the performance reviews require employees to reflect on their growth and their ability to learn. Participant Twelve added there are also weekly one-on-one meetings with supervisors to discuss the past week. Participants normally use these meetings as an opportunity to ask questions, clarify concepts or work through barriers. In preparing for these meetings, participants reflect on their week and their experience with learning.

Perhaps the most effective practice that is meant to encourage reflection are lessons learned. Sometimes referred to as post mortems, these meetings take place once a project has been completed. The purpose of lessons learned is to reflect on how the project was executed and to discuss key experiences that may impact future activities. “The objective is always how to better the process for next year” said Participant One. Participants expressed these were extremely helpful in reflecting on their experience and how they learned along the way. Nonetheless, Participant Three indicated these only occur for major projects that will undoubtedly take place again.

4.5 Theme Five: Challenges

Participants were asked a number of questions surrounding the constraints and circumstances that Millennials encounter while learning. To better understand their experience, the interview data obtained for theme five, *challenges*, was organized into four sub-themes including *time as a major constraint*, *lack of formal orientation*, *rarely the ones to lead the process of institutionalizing*, and *divide between senior generations and Millennials*.

4.5.1 Time as a major constraint. The lack of time and its ramifications were identified by participants as the most prominent challenge they face while learning. They were quick to label Company X as reactionary and expressed their concern that the organization promotes short timelines to execute projects. As a result, participants are forced to learn quickly thus putting them at risk of interpreting information incorrectly and making mistakes. Participant One indicated that because of the nature of the industry, employees are expected to be dynamic and execute very quickly. In consequence, “misinformation can get spread.” Participant Eleven conveyed their frustration with this by stating that “it is frustrating sometimes when we have to

learn something very quickly and then let's say, I'll misrepresent something and then I'll get in trouble from my boss.”

Participant Eleven also expressed that time constraints translate into an unwillingness to share or help others. Earlier, senior employees were identified as the main source of acquiring information. However, when such employees are hindered by time, they become unavailable and reluctant to assist. “One of the things with relying on other people or having to ask for help is that they're not always available. They also have responsibilities and timelines to meet” said Participant Twelve. The participant later pointed out this can be rectified by compromising and scheduling multiple shorter meetings as opposed to a single long one or using alternate means of communication. As Participant Nine indicated, “it's a challenge of who to go to at the right time and through the right channel.”

Similarly, participants expressed their interest in learning and their desire to focus on learning more often. However, time has acted as a major constraint in this context as well. Participant Twelve indicated as much as they would like to invest in learning more often, there is not enough time in the day.

“You always want to learn more, you want grow but you also have responsibilities, right? Deadlines. You have deadlines. You have things that need to be done by a certain time so that doesn't always give you the opportunity to just go out there and talk to people and learn things. Like you have a job to do at the end of the day which is totally understandable” said Participant Twelve.

They must still tend to their regular responsibilities which they are already familiar with and require little to no new learning. On another occasion, other participants added they often set an agenda for themselves so they can accomplish their responsibilities as well as engage in new learning opportunities.

4.5.2 Lack of formal orientation. Another challenge Millennials identified in their experience was a lack of formal orientation. While the participants recognized they are adept to learning on their own, they expressed a desire for an official onboarding. Participant One indicated if you come from a different industry “there is no way you would know what we’re talking about unless you understand the core of what we do.” This includes becoming familiar with the acronyms, terms, and industry standards. Participant Five believed they were one of the few who did not receive an official onboarding training. “I started and it was here is your paperwork, fill it out and hand them in and that was it.” Yet, most of the other participants shared the same statement. Since no initial training of this sort currently exists, participants were obliged to make sense on their own as they encounter each case. As a result, participants indicated it took longer for them to become familiar with their job and they were overwhelmed by the amount of learning.

While the participants expressed their disdain with a lack of official onboarding, those that held a manager position indicated there is an abundance of trainings targeted at their role. Participant Seven discussed the various opportunities that helped them succeed as a manager. These trainings often concentrate on effective communication, the power of informal conversation, working with different personalities and more. Participant Eleven recounted one training in particular that helped managers understand the extent to which communication does not always result in a shared understanding.

“We had these little exercises where the instructor had us fold a piece of paper while we were blindfolded and with very little communication. He’d say ‘fold it this way. Fold it that way.’ All you saw in the end was a bunch of papers folded completely different. So, he said ‘You see what I mean? Even though I’m

communicating, you're not understanding what I'm trying to say” described the participant.

Participant Three also added that “it's really great for people who have other people reporting to them, so teaching them how to be better managers. However, there is absolutely no training or official coaching for everyone below that.”

4.5.3 Rarely the ones to lead the process of institutionalizing. In instances where institutionalizing does take place, Millennials are rarely, if ever, the ones to lead the process. As Participant Three declared “it tends to be somebody from high up who decides that what's going to happen is going to happen, and that we're going to do it.” When asked if they ever felt as if they were a part of the institutionalizing process, participants were quick to say no and express their disappointment. Many participants felt as if they were not empowered enough to do so. On another occasion, Participant Three discussed that although institutionalized learning is often subtle, it is only prevalent during large, high-profile projects.

4.5.4 Divide between senior generations and Millennials. Although only some participants explicitly described a divide between the generations, many alluded to it during their interview. In each of their responses, they described many reasons that contribute to this disconnect; however, the underlying theme among their statements is that this divide is in part due to a lack of rapport between colleagues.

Company X was characterized as having low turnover and many employees who spend most of their career in one place. Participant Four explained there were employees who had been at the organization for 25 to 40 years. Participant Three shared a similar statement and expressed their frustration with the situation. “The thing with Company X is people come here, they stay here, they work here and they're here forever. It's corporate and it's old” said Participant Three.

A few years earlier the organization nearly went bankrupt and Company X was forced to let go many of their employees. For the most part, this happened to be individuals from Generation X. When Company X was thriving once again, they began hiring Millennials out of school. Participants described the current state of the organization as populated by Baby Boomers and Millennials. Participant Nine indicated that “there's a clash right now. We can see there are two types of workers. There are people who are closer to their retirement and then a lot of our generation coming in.”

Referred to as lifers by the younger generation, these employees are known to be resistant to change. Participant Four pointed out that “most of the people that are Millennials are going to try and get change implemented”; however, those who have been at the organization much longer are set in their ways.

Participant Nine said “We have these people say ‘well this is the recipe that we've been doing for so long and it is working.’ And we have all these new, younger people coming in with crazy ideas and the willingness to do so much more and they clash.”

Participants described this as an ongoing and infuriating conflict.

Senior generations were also known to stereotype and dismiss employees because of their age. Participant Eight recalled examples of elder colleagues being disrespectful behind their back.

“Through the grapevine, from what I hear, people talk behind my back. Not much to my face, but behind my back and because of my age. I'm very fortunate to be in my position. I have a lot of oversight, not managerial oversight, but I have a lot of exposure to a lot of the different areas. People don't like that because of my age” described Participant Eight.

On the other hand, Participant Three recounted cases where their opinion was openly rejected because of their age. Participant Ten also indicated they had experienced many instances where they were stereotyped as entitled or lazy. Participant Ten is a 28-year-old male who recently joined the Finance department. Other participants shared similar stories; however, Participant Thirteen was hopeful in stating “people are changing.” Participants expressed that this impacted their ability to learn, because certain employees would act as a barrier and refuse to help them when in need. In contexts such as these, participants indicated they had to become increasingly resourceful to overcome barriers such as these.

4.6 Summary

Chapter Four explored the findings from the data collection and organized them into five distinct themes, namely *learning is essential*, *self-learning*, *communication*, *reflection* and finally, *challenges*. Each theme was supported using direct quotations and data from the transcripts. In the next chapter, I will discuss this study’s findings and address the three research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings from the interview data revealed five primary themes that explore the relationship between Millennials and learning within the context of the workplace. These findings will be considered closely with the theoretical framework derived from the literature review. Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework will be used as the theoretical perspective to contribute to a better understanding of organizational learning. The following paragraphs discuss the research questions using data drawn from the five themes and the theoretical framework.

5.1 Research Question 1

The first research question asked how Millennials experience organizational learning. In an effort to respond, participants were asked a series of questions that allude to Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework. These were meant to uncover how Millennials engage with the process of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing to better understand how they experience each step individually, and more importantly, the framework as a whole.

5.1.1 Intuiting. The first of the four learning processes is intuiting. Crossan et al. (1999) describe this as when individuals recognize patterns or possibilities in their own present or past that may be applicable to their current work environment. This is normally preconscious and may take the form of experiences, images, and metaphors; however, these are only acknowledged or articulated during the interpretation phase.

Since this occurs at a moment prior to consciousness, participants are not accustomed to realizing their relationship to intuiting. In consequence, sensemaking is an important part of discussing this process in an attempt to understand the event in a complete and detailed manner. During the interviews, participants were prompted to rely on past experiences they were

otherwise unaware of to help them make sense of intuiting. Thus, using dialogue, they discussed their experience with intuiting and brought their understanding into a state of consciousness.

Participants identified a combination of sources that act as a tool to produce learning and the process of intuiting. These include, but are not limited to, their colleagues, e-mails and the internet. Certain responsibilities also act as a cue for acquiring new information. When they come across such knowledge, they unconsciously recognize a pattern or possibility that could be relevant to their current work environment. Although they are unaware in the moment, they begin to make sense of this information using experiences and metaphors. For instance, participants described the different tactics that induce learning and lead to interpretation; however, seeing as this is a preconscious process, it was difficult for them to determine the exact methods they commonly use during intuiting.

Considering intuiting occurs distinctly at the individual level, it is understandable that participants recognize this as a process that relies entirely on the individual themselves. While discussing self-learning, participants expressed that they are responsible for the career they want to pursue. Therefore, for intuiting to occur, participants indicated they must be receptive to new learning possibilities. The findings showed that participants understand the value of learning and, as a result, they make a conscious effort to expose themselves to as many learning opportunities as possible. While this can also be said about other generations, Millennials of Company X are eager to acquire knowledge and engage in experiences that will better themselves. As a result, they are open-minded when it comes to intuition and the process of learning.

5.1.2 Interpreting. Crossan et al. (1999) explain interpreting as the process of sharing their own insights or ideas through words or actions. Language, metaphors, cognitive maps, and conversation are all methods used to help interpret and share their intuition with colleagues.

Learning moves beyond an individual endeavour into a group experience over the course of this phase. During the interviews, participants gravitated to discussing their experience with learning as it relates to this process. Specifically, participants considered the challenging nature of interpretation as the distinct part of learning that motivates them to continue to learn and succeed. As a result, it can be argued that they perceive learning most importantly as the process of interpreting new knowledge.

Additionally, sensemaking plays an essential role in interpreting what has been learned. For instance, under the fourth theme, *reflection*, participants acknowledged the significance of making sense and reflection during this specific process to properly understand their new knowledge. At times, participants used the terms learning, making sense, and interpreting interchangeably thus further demonstrating that they see an intrinsic relationship between the three.

To increase their ability to interpret information, participants expose themselves to any opportunity to acquire new knowledge. According to Weick's (1995) interpretation of sensemaking, when an unfamiliar context is encountered this acts as a cue for sensemaking thus encouraging reflection and learning. As the frequency of this context increases, they acquire a greater capability of making sense under these circumstances. This is because they have a better understanding of the situation and how to interpret in the future. For instance, participants stated that they make a constant effort to expose themselves to new learning opportunities to prepare for future contexts. As they encounter these contexts moving forward, they are more adept to interpretation and better equipped to approach the situation. Given that Weick's (1995) understanding of sensemaking is not exclusive to a single generation, it can be assumed this trait

is also applicable to Baby Boomers and Generation X; accordingly, this could serve as an opportunity for future research.

As they try to interpret what has been learned, participants engage in each of the seven properties outlined by Weick (1995). According to Weick (1995) sensemaking is rooted in identity construction, is retrospective, creates our reality, is social and ongoing, is guided and prompted by cues, as well as driven by plausibility. Therefore, as participants take part in interpretation, they are redefining their own identity, even in the slightest way, based on their understanding and interaction with colleagues. To make sense of their acquired knowledge, they continuously engage with others in an ongoing attempt to draw on past experiences to interpret what is being learned. This process is also being driven by cues that produce certain understandings; meanwhile, participants are creating the reality they were trying to grasp.

While discussing this topic, participants indicated they use a combination of methods to help them interpret what they have learned. Most notably, they lean heavily on senior employees to assist them in the process of interpretation. This is understandable considering this phase occurs at the individual and the group level and that such employees often have more knowledge by virtue of their experience. In addition, they use a variety of other techniques as well. For instance, participants repeatedly mentioned the support of visual maps in combination with examples and metaphors, industry competitors, and Google as other important methods. As Millennials, participants believe in using a combination of techniques to build a broad and robust interpretation as well as to confirm their acquired knowledge is being interpreted correctly.

Participants also identify open-communication, and more specifically face-to-face interactions, as critical to this process. Given that knowledge goes from pre-verbal to verbal during the interpretation phase, it is logical that communication would be important. Lester et al.

(2012) write that Millennials value a nurturing environment where they can obtain consistent and constant feedback from their leaders. The feedback they desire is not only about their personal development; rather, they require open-communication to speak freely with their colleagues and to obtain their opinion. Participants also expressed a preference for face-to-face interactions to gauge the reaction of others and build strong relationships. Likewise, this is similar to findings on Baby Boomers and Generation X (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Zopiatis, Krambia-Kapardis & Varnavas, 2012). Under the theme of communication, participants indicated that social relationships are important so they feel comfortable making mistakes. They believe part of interpreting is misinterpreting and learning from those misunderstandings. Therefore, face-to-face interactions make it easy for participants to communicate their interpretation and receive immediate feedback from colleagues.

Communication was also identified as critical to building a shared understanding. Participants described speaking different languages than others in the organization. They are aware that their background and those of their colleagues' shape how they understand and communicate. Therefore, communication is considered important for participants to adjust their own mental map to convey their interpretation effectively with other members.

5.1.3 Integrating. In their model, Crossan et al. (1999) describe integrating as a collective process whereby individual perceptions are adjusted to create a shared understanding and a course of action. This normally begins as an informal process yet, as it reoccurs in a significant way, what has been learned becomes institutionalized. Based on the findings, participants had a difficult time distinguishing the interpretation and integration phase from one another. During the interviews, they would often repeat themselves when the appropriate

questions were asked. As a result, it can be argued that participants experience the two processes in a similar way.

Again, participants see communication as crucial to the integration process. Seeing as this phase is concerned with creating a shared understanding, communication is necessary to successfully comprehend their colleagues' respective cognitive maps and adjust their own perception accordingly. Participants indicated this can be a difficult and lengthy process, especially with colleagues from different generations or backgrounds. When this is the case, they often have a difficult time engaging in a constructive conversation where both parties are willing to modify their understanding.

When a shared understanding is reached, participants use collaboration as a means of facilitating the integration of knowledge. For instance, participants described their weekly one-on-one meetings as they discussed the importance of reflection and institutionalized practices. While these are often used to generate reflection, they also encourage collaboration and help determine a plan of action to integrate what has been learned. As a result, participants consider collaborating as critical to their experience with learning. Given that Baby Boomers value team work and group decision making, it can be argued these two generations are alike in this sense (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2013). In contrast, Generation X is known to be self-reliant, prefer to work alone and have a greater sense of individualism than other generations (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Hite & McDonald, 2012).

Additionally, based on the interview data, participants' experience with learning new information often comes to an end at the integration phase. They expressed their disappointment and described examples where something is learned only to be integrated once and then neglected or forgotten moving forward. As such, participants labeled Company X as reactive.

This is because information is commonly ignored once it has been integrated. Instead of drawing from institutionalized practices, when the organization encounters a similar context again it must relearn the essential information. While this finding is relevant to their experience, it can be argued this is not true to every organization. As such, participants feel that most knowledge should be institutionalized so the organization can be more successful and adept at reacting.

5.1.4 Institutionalizing. Lastly, Crossan et al. (1999) explain institutionalizing as the process of ingraining what has been learned into the organization. It is important to note this is an intentional effort to embed the knowledge into the work environment to guarantee that routinized actions occur. In keeping with Crossan et al. (1999), institutionalizing ensues in hopes of repeating and regulating what has been learned to be converted into institutions of the organization which are then accessible to members. These are commonly systems, structures, procedures, or strategies that can also become fixed into the artifacts, values, and assumptions of the workplace. As a result, the culture of the organization acts as a vehicle for learning to be distributed during the feedback process.

Institutionalizing occurs distinctly at the organizational level with individuals and groups being able to either feed-forward their acquired knowledge or pull from institutionalized practices during feedback. Considering institutionalizing is a deliberate process, only certain members have the agency to ensure that what has been learned becomes converted into systems, structures, procedures, or strategy.

While discussing this topic, participants expressed they are almost never the ones to guide the process of institutionalizing. This was described primarily under the heading of challenges where they stated their frustration with some attributing it to their age or role in the organization. Nonetheless, in situations such as these, participants feel as if they are not

empowered and are insignificant in comparison to the broader organization. During the feed-forward process, they participate in learning and try to bring about change into the organization. They generally enjoy this process since they are motivated and challenged as they engage in feed-forward learning. However, regardless of their own efforts or success, it is normally a senior colleague who will ultimately determine whether knowledge is institutionalized. Again, this can be attributed to the specific culture of the organization or where they stand in their career; nonetheless, this finding demonstrates that the Millennials of Company X value being made to feel a part of important decisions within the workplace.

As they described their frustration, participants indicated they also feel as if they are being told how to act. According to Shaw and Fairhurst (2008) Millennials like to feel as if they have the freedom to complete tasks in their own way and at their own pace. To a certain extent, institutionalized practices dictate the parameters of their freedom. Therefore, if participants did have an active role in institutionalizing then they would feel as if they had more independence and agency.

On another occasion, participants expressed their appreciation for certain institutionalized practices, especially those that help them reflect on what they have learned and how. For instance, while discussing the institutionalized practices, participants indicated the importance of reflection in respect to learning. Ultimately, they believe that for learning to continue to be effective, they must reflect on their experience and consider what they have learned from it. Therefore, they described a variety of systems, structures, procedures, and strategies that are in place to help them reflect on their acquired knowledge. The two most notable practices include performance reviews and lessons learned. Performance reviews help participants assess their

personal development whereas lessons learned generate reflection on key experiences that may impact future activities.

5.1.5 The 4I Framework. Despite their grievances, participants see learning as a major means of motivation. They are often challenged by the process of interpreting and as a result, they are driven to seek new learning opportunities and share their knowledge once they are successful. Likewise, as participants become more motivated they become engaged with their colleagues and enthusiastic about their role. This often translates into success in the work environment and increased opportunities.

As participants discussed their experience with learning, they expressed that the distinct phases often coincide with one another. This is especially the case for the process of interpretation and integration. Likewise, participants acknowledge that learning is not a linear process; rather, they commonly acquire information from systems, structures, or procedures in the workplace as well as consolidate what they have learned with the organization itself. These become manifested in the feedback and feed-forward process respectively.

On another occasion, participants recognized they have less control over learning as it develops. For instance, under the fifth theme, *challenges*, they expressed they have no influence over the process of institutionalizing. As learning progresses from intuiting to interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing, learning develops from an individual to a group and then organizational process. Therefore, it is understandable that participants feel this way since as it progresses, learning becomes a group affair. Typically, Millennials are the youngest in the workplace and have the least seniority; as a result, they have the least impact organizational decisions.

While participants see the importance of learning and are eager to help others learn, they know this is not the case for everyone. In their experience, they have been met with resistance, especially when engaging in learning with employees who have been at the organization for a long period of time. Typically, this tends to be employees of senior generations (Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008; Zopiatis et al., 2012); however, it is important to note this is not necessarily a product of their generation, but perhaps due to the stage in their career. In discussing this topic, participants alluded to the separate sub-cultures that either support learning or are resistant towards it. Participants consider themselves a part of the former. According to Tilchin & Essawi (2013) a learning culture depends on an employee's willingness to create, transfer, share, and apply knowledge and the level of consensus among other members who value learning and its application. While discussing the divide between the generations, participants described tension with senior employees who are unwilling to transfer, share, or even apply knowledge in some cases. Such individuals belong to a sub-culture that opposes learning. As a result, participants tend to gravitate to people who support a learning culture and are excited to bring about renewal.

Lastly, they see learning is an endless process. Although participants may successfully master one subject, they are aware that at no point do they know all that they could know, nor should they be satisfied with their limited knowledge. As a result, Millennials of Company X recognize that despite some of the challenges they face during the process, they see the value and importance in their experience and are committed to learning. While they share their love for learning with other generations, Baby Boomers tend to be slow learners although committed to lifelong learning (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Gursoy et al., 2008). Similarly, Generation X value employee development and seek jobs that provide training (Morton, 2002).

5.2 Research Question 2

The second research question asked how Millennials cope with the challenges they face while learning. To address this question, participants were asked to describe some of the challenges they encounter and more specifically, how they confront them. This is addressed under theme five, *challenges*. As they identified the four major obstacles they experience, participants also identified three distinct strategies they use to cope. These include being resourceful, prioritizing goals, and communicating.

5.2.1 Be Resourceful. Participants identify being resourceful as the most effective means of overcoming the challenges they face while learning, so much so that this became a theme of its own in the previous chapter. As detailed in theme two, *self-learning*, participants discussed a culture that encourages members to pursue their own learning opportunities and to take control of their experience. For that reason, when they are faced with a challenging situation they become increasingly resourceful to surmount the difficult circumstances. Ultimately, they go about accomplishing this in two distinct ways.

First, when participants are faced with a difficult situation they become creative in acquiring and combining sources to obtain what they need to know. This tactic is especially prevalent in challenging circumstances such as negotiating difficult timelines, coping with a lack of official orientation, or dealing with unhelpful colleagues. In contexts such as these, participants use a variety of official and unofficial sources to overcome whatever learning obstacles may be in their way. For instance, they indicated that when they are not provided with the proper orientation on a subject matter, they are unable to acquire the necessary information. As a result, they resort to other sources of knowledge. Participants went on to reveal they often pull fragments of information from a combination of old documents, other colleagues, contacts at

competing organizations and the internet to help interpret what could have otherwise been obtained from an organized introduction to the topic. This finding demonstrates that similarly to literature that defines Generation X, participants are independent and resourceful in how they learn.

Second, participants indicated they are also especially reliant on sources that are external to the organization in contexts such as coping with time constraints, dealing with a lack of official orientation, or working with an unhelpful colleague. Participants acknowledge the importance and authenticity of official internal sources and artifacts; however, they can be difficult to access and not as thorough as they would like. In consequence, sources that are external to the workplace can be just as helpful and sometimes even more so. For instance, participants described Google as well as competing or similar organizations as a great resource. In discussing this topic, each participant revealed they rely heavily on Google. Whether it is to search for a relevant article or a helpful YouTube video, they believe they can acquire all they need to know online in order to interpret and integrate information successfully. Given Millennials are high users of technology and take the internet for granted, this not a surprise (Hite & McDonald, 2012). This finding is not unique to Millennials; however, it can be argued they are the most adept in this regard given that many Baby Boomers struggle with technology and Generation X is less technologically literate than Millennials (Sibarani, Tjakraatmadja, Putro & Munir, 2015). Participants also resort to industry standards or their professional network outside of the organization as a source of information. They argue it is important to work with competing organizations to learn from best practices and to avoid making the same mistakes.

By being resourceful and applying these two tactics, participants can cope with the challenges they face while learning. They expressed they are often bound by time constraints and

being resourceful can help them acquire and interpret information in a quicker and more strategic manner. Similarly, participants know that being resourceful is the only way to acquire knowledge that would otherwise be presented in an official orientation. If they choose not to be resourceful in the face of this challenge, then they will simply not know essential information. Lastly, as described in theme two, *self-learning*, participants are extremely dependent on senior employees as a source of knowledge. As a result, when colleagues act as a barrier to learning participants must be resourceful and acquire their information elsewhere.

5.2.2 Prioritize Goals. When dealing with challenges induced by time, participants indicated that prioritizing their goals to plan accordingly is the best way to cope. They expressed that time constraints create a culture where everyone is too busy to share. Such constraints also put them at risk of interpreting information incorrectly and inhibits the time they would normally spend learning. As a result, setting goals and establishing a plan to reach them helps participants strategically decide which tasks are worth concentrating on.

For instance, determining their goals and planning accordingly helps participants counteract a culture where open communication is supposedly prevalent but in reality, everyone is too preoccupied to help. Such a culture was exemplified in the findings of theme three, *communication*; additionally, it is positioned against the challenges of time constraints. While participants are adept at multi-tasking and see learning as a major means of motivation, mistakes are made due to short timelines and new learning opportunities are commonly neglected to prioritize more pressing responsibilities. Accordingly, participants can overcome each of the challenges identified by strategically setting objectives and acting with those in mind.

5.2.3 Communicate. Communication was identified by participants as helpful in many ways while learning, one of which is to overcome the challenges they face. As detailed

throughout the third theme, *communication*, and again in the fifth theme, *challenges*, participants expressed that communication is normally the leading tactic they resort to when they encounter an obstacle. This tactic is applied to cope with each of the four challenges participants identified in the interviews. Generally, in this context, participants harness their communication skills to educate, to compromise, and most notably, to work through conflict.

First, as part of the Millennial generation, participants communicate with the intent of educating their colleagues especially when they encounter employees who are resistant to change. Generation X is the most similar to Millennials given they welcome change and will adapt; in contrast, Baby Boomers are known to oppose change (Zopiatis et al., 2012). Under these circumstances, participants have found the best way to work through this conflict is to educate colleagues on why change is necessary and to explain it in a relatable manner. They indicated that in their experience, senior generations have been apprehensive towards any sort of shift simply because they are threatened or they believe their technique is superior. This is in line with research on Baby Boomers who generally feel anxious by downsizing, re-engineering and restructuring of any sort (Zopiatis et al., 2012). In cases such as these, participants of the study maintain that education is the best means of accomplishing change and lessening any divide between generations.

Second, participants communicate as a means of compromising when they cannot reach a shared understanding. They use this tactic often with colleagues with a different background or perspective to accommodate both parties. For instance, they will communicate with their colleague to reach a balance between their two approaches during the integration phase. Again, this often minimizes any divide and encourages colleagues to work as a team. This is as opposed

to each individual rejecting their peer's understanding thus creating greater tension between them.

Compromise is also used to deal with constraints imposed by time. The findings suggest that as part of the Millennial generation participants prefer face-to-face communication to create a shared understanding; however, due to time restrictions it is not always possible for the separate parties to find an opportunity to do so. As opposed to simply not learning or resorting to a lesser source, they will compromise to find an alternate time or medium including email, video conferencing, and more.

Lastly, participants use communication to work through conflict. For instance, they will express their own opinions or aspirations to their colleagues in hopes of initiating constructive conversation, overcoming any challenges and successfully integrating what has been learned. This includes expressing their need for official orientations as well as their frustration with being unable to prompt institutionalizing on their own. In discussing this topic, participants indicated they use this tactic often to cope with differences between generations. For example, they will explain to their senior colleagues that they should not be treated according to Millennial stereotypes. For the most part, participants describe this tactic as successful; however, at times they let the situation escalate before resorting to communication.

5.3 Research Question 3

The third research question asked how Millennials use the knowledge they have acquired. To better understand, participants were asked whether learning was important to them, thus prompting them to explain why. It was necessary to understand their motivation in order to bring to light how they apply what they have learned. Ultimately, how participants use what they have learned was dependent on their initial purpose. This then led to uncovering that they see learning

as indispensable and that they exercise what they have learned with one of three objectives in mind. These objectives include personal development, accomplishing day-to-day tasks and initiating change.

5.3.1 Personal Development. First, based on the interview data, personal development was identified as the leading reason why participants actively engage in learning. In the context of the organization, they must acquire new skills or knowledge to improve. Therefore, participants expressed they integrate what they have learned to grow as an individual and as a professional, as well as to build upon their existing knowledge base. Specifically, they capture what they have learned and add it to their growing repertoire to maximize their potential. According to existing literature, this finding is similar to Generation X (Bova & Kroth, 2001).

Lyons et al. (2012) indicate that Millennials have high expectations for advancement. According to participants, as a means of reaching these expectations, they invest in their personal development and therefore, their capacity to learn. For instance, they directly associate learning and advancing their career. Again, this is most like Generation X who learns with the intentions of improving their skillset (Bova & Kroth, 2001). Participants noted that because they are more driven to learn, they often see Millennials, including themselves, being promoted more quickly than senior colleagues. Hite & McDonald (2012) argue this could be because Millennials are at a different career stage than senior generations. Nonetheless, participants attribute their success to how they acquire and apply their knowledge. They take advantage of any opportunity to learn and use that to improve their existing skills and qualities thus improving their worth and the caliber of their work. Ultimately, this is applied in hopes of enhancing their employability.

Furthermore, while discussing personal development, participants expressed that learning is an endless process. As they continued to learn, participants continue to integrate and leverage

their knowledge to maximize their potential. They acknowledged they will never reach a point of perfection nor completion; rather, they will always have room to grow and improve. As a result, they will forever apply what they have learned to enhance their skills and qualities. According to participants, this continuous journey also serves as a means of motivation thus aligning with Lyons et al.'s (2012) findings.

5.3.2 Accomplish Day-to-Day Tasks. Second, participants indicated that they apply what they have learned to accomplish day-to-day tasks. While they consider personal development as their primary objective, they identified their ability to succeed in their role as the foundation of their worth and knowledge base; especially that without success in their current position, they would be deemed as dispensable by the organization. Therefore, participants indicated that they use what they have learned to manage their everyday responsibilities.

By applying their acquired knowledge in this way, they participate in the feedback process of learning. According to Crossan et al. (1999), feedback reinforces what the organization has already learned using systems, structures, and strategy to affect individual and group learning. Therefore, participants use the knowledge they acquired through feedback to manage their everyday responsibilities. In doing so, they also exploit what has already been learned thus generating a fundamental part of the tension that is crucial to the strategic renewal of the organization.

Based on the interview data, this method of applying knowledge is used often during their first year of employment. While discussing learning as essential to success, participants indicated that when they begin a new position, they must become acquainted with the role and the knowledge required to accomplish day-to-day tasks. As a result, they ask questions and engage in learning activities that help them familiarize with their job. In discussing this topic,

participants expressed that the culture of the organization encourages learning in this regard. In reference to Schein's (1990) levels of culture, there are many artifacts in the organization that help Millennials manage their responsibilities. For instance, participants identified rituals such as job shadowing and informal mentorships while also referencing the organization of space. The open concept office encourages open communication and makes it easy to ask questions quickly thus making it simple for participants to acquire the necessary information to accomplish their day-to-day tasks.

5.3.3 Initiate Change. Finally, as introduced under the first theme, *learning is essential*, participants use what they have learned to initiate change. More specifically, they integrate and use their acquired knowledge to improve systems, structures, and strategy and to challenge people to innovate. Ultimately, this is done by applying what they have learned in different ways than it was necessarily intended to achieve divergent outcomes or to enhance efficiency. As such, participants experiment with what they have learned to contribute to the renewal in the workplace, which is critical for it to evolve and remain competitive.

While many participants indicated they use what they have learned to initiate change, they also allege that to do so, they need to feel comfortable making mistakes. This is a reassurance that is a product of their environment and is identified by Shaw & Fairhurst (2008) as fundamental in the nurturing work environment that Millennials crave. For instance, under the third theme, *communication*, participants expressed that being able to speak freely with each other has helped them build a strong relationship with their supervisor. Such a relationship has satisfied their desire for freedom and to complete tasks in their own way, at their own pace. As a result, participants are confident to experiment with what they have learned. It can be assumed

that under the same circumstances, other generations would feel the same; however, more research must be conducted to establish any definitive conclusions.

Additionally, by using their acquired knowledge to initiate change, participants practice the feed-forward process of learning. According to Crossan et al. (1999), the feed-forward learning flow compels the organization to innovate and renew; however, this depends on whether and how individual learning feeds forward into learning at the group and organizational levels. Therefore, participants use the knowledge they obtained and attempt to initiate change by feeding it forward into group and organizational learning. By successfully doing so, they learn in new ways thus engaging in exploration and contributing to the tension of the feed-forward and feedback process. In keeping with Crossan et al. (1999), the tension that derives from exploitation and exploration is crucial to the refreshment and replacement of organizational attributes; thus, the strategic renewal of the organization.

Additionally, while other generations would likely argue the same, as Millennials, participants believe their generation is normally the most receptive to change. Therefore, they not only experiment with what they have learned to improve the organization itself but also to challenge their colleagues to innovate. In their experience, participants indicated that senior generations are extremely resistant to any sort of transformation, whether it be systems, structures, or strategy. As a result, participants use their acquired learning to give concrete and logical explanations to sway their opinion and help educate why change is necessary. While many remained resistant, participants agreed they could relate to senior generations and influence their opinion by speaking to them using their own cognitive constructs. Nonetheless, they would argue that there are multiple sub-cultures in the organization which are dictated by those who partake in innovation and change, and those who do not.

5.4 Summary

Chapter Five discussed the findings from the interview data in combination with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two. More specifically, Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework of intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing was used as the guiding perspective and the foundation of this discussion. This chapter outlined how participants experience organizational learning which helped inform how they cope with the challenges they face and apply the knowledge they have acquired.

The concluding chapter will present a review of this study's findings, limitations, benefits and implications for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to explore how Millennials experience organizational learning, how they cope with the challenges they face while learning, and how they apply the knowledge acquired through learning.

Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, 13 Millennial respondents from a single organization discussed their relationship with the process of learning. Following the data collection, a thematic analysis was carried out to derive meaning from the findings and Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework of learning was employed as the theoretical perspective through which learning was understood.

6.1 Summary

First, due to the complex nature of organizational learning, the data revealed several important findings as to how Millennials experience Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework. Overall participants consider learning as an ongoing and never-ending means motivation and attaining success. They embrace the chaos that is often associated to the process and encourage the change that commonly follows. In regard to the specific social and psychological processes, the data highlights that participants experience each one differently.

Intuiting is a preconscious activity therefore they are often unaware that they are engaging in the process. Nonetheless, they make a conscious effort to expose themselves to a variety of sources to prompt learning.

According to participants, learning is perceived as the process of *interpreting* new knowledge; therefore, it is distinguished as the most notable of the four processes. They see making sense and interpreting as interchangeable; thus, a combination of methods is used to interpret learning. Subsequently, face-to-face communication is identified as critical to this stage.

Participants experience *integrating* similarly to interpreting. They believe open and constant communication is an important part of collaboration to create a shared understanding and integrate what has been learned. They commonly encounter the most challenges during this process considering integration encompasses the backgrounds and behaviours of colleagues.

Although participants actively consume institutionalized practices, they are rarely the ones to initiate the process of *institutionalizing*. They value being made to feel a part of the important decisions within the workplace; thus, if they had an active role in this process they would likely feel as if they had more agency. Nonetheless, participants appreciate the institutionalized systems and structures that help them reflect on their experience and consider what they have learned.

Second, the data revealed that while learning, participants use three distinct strategies to cope with the challenges they face. To surmount difficult situations, they *become increasingly resourceful* in acquiring and integrating information. They are especially reliant on external sources, which are primarily accessed online, to help them gather knowledge in a quicker and more strategic manner. Participants also overcome the challenges they encounter by *prioritizing goals* and acting with those in mind. Lastly, they harness their *communication* skills in the face of a challenge to educate, to compromise, and most notably, to work through conflict.

Third, the study findings highlight that participants apply what they have learned with three distinct purposes in mind. The leading reason is *personal development*, which Millennials consider an endless and ongoing process. They capture what they have learned and add it to their growing repertoire to maximize their potential. Participants also use the knowledge they acquire to *accomplish their day-to-day tasks*. Their ability to succeed in their role is the foundation of their worth and knowledge base, without which they would be deemed as dispensable by the

organization. At last, the third purpose is to *initiate change*. Participants use what they have learned to improve systems, structures, and strategy and to challenge people to innovate.

6.2 Implications

This study offers many beneficial insights to the field of organizational learning and workplace diversity in addition to like-minded organizations. In light of the findings, the following implications are presented.

6.2.1 Implications for organizational learning. This study intended to enhance the understanding of organizational learning and assess how it is experienced by specific individuals. Having done so from the perspective of the Millennial generation, the outcomes of this thesis underline that learning is experienced differently based on the background and characteristics of the individual engaging in the process. Likewise, by identifying the challenges encountered while learning, this study highlights the distinct tactics that can be used to overcome any barriers thus increasing the success of organizational learning. Lastly, in determining the different intentions that drive learning, research in this field can benefit from understanding the underlying motivations behind this process.

6.2.2 Implications for workplace diversity. In the realm of workplace diversity, the findings from this study have many important implications. By investigating Millennials' experience with learning in a multi-generational context, a better understanding of the role of communication and the dynamics between the various generations can be deduced. Specifically, this can contribute to a better awareness of how the distinguishing characteristics of the Millennial generation and their relationship with other generations influences their experience with various organizational practices, specifically learning.

6.2.3 Implications for managing Millennials. This study also has important implications for practice. Workplaces who share a similar environment with a multi-generational workforce or an influx of Millennial employees could employ the findings of this study to encourage positive outcomes. These include the ability to motivate, retain, and engage Millennials through learning, ensure the seamless transfer of knowledge, and increase the organization's capacity for successful renewal.

6.3 Limitations

Although this research study has reached its objectives, several limitations should be considered. First, the sample consisted of 13 members from the same workplace and therefore only incorporates the perspective of a single organization. In consequence, the organizational culture of Company X could also be a contributing influence in this study. The culture of an organization is unique to that of the workplace; thus, by selecting participants from a single organization, the findings are limited to individuals who are attracted to and immersed in such a culture. Likewise, given the limited number of participants, it cannot be assumed that this sample size is representative of the Millennial generation. Instead, the findings of this study are representative of the organizational actors at Company X. As outlined in the directions for future research below, more research should be committed to extending these findings as they account for a more robust and diverse group of variables.

It should also be noted that the concept of "Millennial" can be perceived as a sociological construct; therefore, the generalizability of the findings must be considered. By using categorical statements such as "Millennial" to represent a group of individuals, the designation itself is also created. The many variations and combinations that accompany such a categorization must

therefore be recognized. As a result, the emphasis of this study is on the participants themselves as organizational actors and members of the Millennial generation.

Lastly, the process of learning occurs through time and space; therefore, to produce a sound analysis, the researcher must be present as learning unfolds. However, given the rarity and challenges associated to obtaining such natural data, organizational learning must be reconstructed through conversation and/or observation. The in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in this study allow participants to make sense of their experience with organizational learning. The researcher participates in the reconstruction as well by acting as a third sense maker.

6.3.1 Researcher's Lens. The motivation to pursue this thesis comes from my own experience with organizational learning as part of the Millennial generation. As such, it is important that I recognize my lens as a potential limitation. During the data collection, my role as a researcher and simultaneously as a Millennial helped participants make statements that they might not have otherwise made. This resulted in rich, valuable data that contributed immensely to the findings of this study. Nonetheless, the presence of my lens was unavoidable during the data analysis and subsequent discussion. Qualitative inquiry is interpretive by its very nature; therefore, to establish the validity of this thesis, a clear audit trail was kept, reflexivity was incorporated into the account of the research design, and multiple lens' were used (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Specifically, these lens' include existing studies as well as reviewers who were both affiliated with the project and not.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

This thesis has acted as an introductory exploration with several opportunities for future research. First, this study could be replicated with other variables in mind. For instance, the

findings of this thesis were meant to be representative of the Millennial population in Canada. As such, the perspective and experience of Millennials from other distinct nations could be examined. Additionally, to further extend the possibilities of such a study, a comparative analysis could then be executed to explore the similarities and discrepancies between the learning experience of Millennials from distinct countries.

The same approach could be exercised taking into account other generations. Given that as the researcher I am a Millennial, and this study only interviewed individuals from the same generation, collecting data from participants of various generations would provide a broader perspective and could result in interesting connections between each group. Topics that could be explored further, taking into account generational diversity, include the importance of developing a rapport, how to maximize the transfer of knowledge and account for complex interactions between generations, and how all this can have implications for effective succession planning.

Second, future research could be committed to understanding the correlation between generational traits and life stages. Organizational learning scholarship could benefit from understanding whether Millennials' experience is associated only to the generational traits they embody or whether life stages have an impact. As such, a longitudinal study could be performed using Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I Framework to further explore the topic.

Third, since strategic renewal is endogenous to Crossan et al.'s (1999) conceptualization of learning, the process of feed-forward and feedback are imperative. Whereas this thesis focused primarily on the four distinct phases of the framework, future research could benefit from a study that undertakes the feed-forward and feedback process as the leading experience of

interest. As such, the tension between exploration and exploitation as experienced by the Millennial generation could be further explored.

Fourth, the findings of this study demonstrated that Millennials prefer face-to-face interactions to create a shared understanding; however, it contradicts the common stereotype that Millennials favour mediated interactions (Twenge & Campbell, 2012). While this finding could be unique to Company X, more research could be committed to understanding this discrepancy and its importance.

Lastly, Millennials identified the dynamics between the various generations as an impact on how they learn. A range of relationships and factors easily facilitate or inhibit the successful transfer of knowledge between generations. As such, organizational learning, communication, and diversity scholarship could each benefit from future research into the role of communication and the interactions between these generations as they learn.

This thesis has focused on learning from the perspective of the Millennial, but these principles can apply to all generations. Rapid changes in the work climate bring many challenges for managing employees and ensuring the successful survival of the organization. Understanding the specific way learning is experienced, the tactics used to overcome challenges, and the motivations behind learning not only improve the ability to tailor learning initiatives, but also contribute to better recognizing and managing the tensions between exploration and exploitation which help inspire the strategic renewal of the organization.

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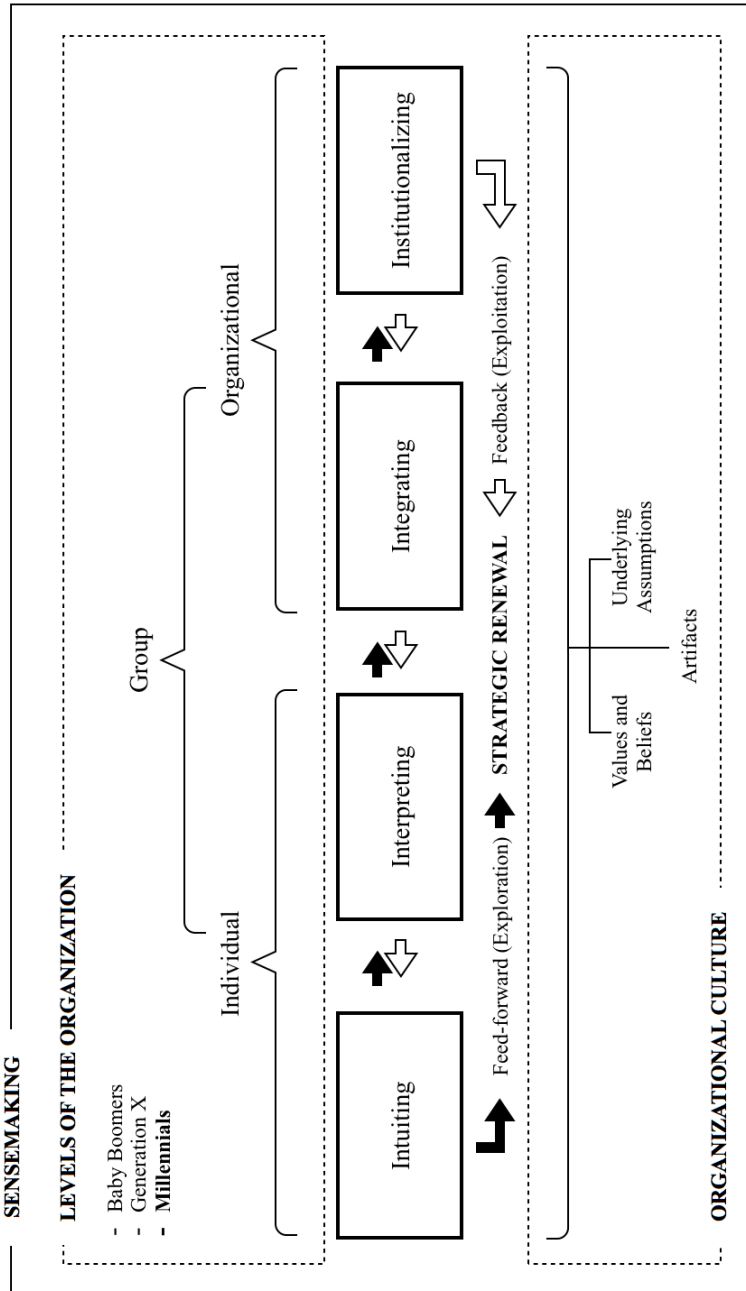
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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Theoretical Framework




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Appendix 2 – Letter of Recruitment for Participants
Recruitment Letter: Participants

Researcher: Mackenzie Rae Messenger
Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa

Supervisor: Peruvemba S. Jaya
Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa

Dear [NAME],

I am an MA student in the Department of Communication conducting research on how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning. With permission from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview to help inform my research. Your expertise as part of the Millennial generation and your exposure to learning in the workplace is greatly needed to help reach the goal of this study. This goal is to understand how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning and explore the significance of these findings for the future of learning within the workplace. Ideally this would result in improved organizational learning and therefore the continued success and renewal of the organization.

Participants will be selected depending on their classification as a Millennial (born between 1981-2000) and their exposure to learning in their daily work environment. They will also be selected on a first come, first served basis.

Your participation will be needed for approximately one hour and will include one semi-structured interview. Your identity, and that of all participants, will be kept private and confidential. Additionally, the nature of the questions posed is such that there is no risk to you. Furthermore, the research is being conducted separately from the organization and choosing to participate (or not) will have no effect on your relationship with your employer.

The answers that you provide in the semi-structured interview will be audio-taped and, later, transcribed. Your answers will be treated as strictly confidential, and therefore will be kept in a secure area. Once the data from the completed interview has been transcribed, any information that could identify you, the individual – for example, your name – will be omitted and replaced with your pseudonym in any of the analyses, published articles and/or presentations.

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I would be glad to work with participants at times and locations that are convenient to them. It is anticipated that interviews will run from January through February. I do hope you will agree to participate in this study. If you are interested in participating in a semi-structured interview, please contact me by [DATE] by email or phone. Please also let me know the best way to contact you.

Thank you,

Mackenzie Rae Messenger

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Appendix 3 – Demographic Information Sheet**Demographic Information Sheet**

Instructions: Please provide a response for each of the following questions. To protect your personal information, a pseudonym will be used.

1. Name:

2. Gender:

Female Male

You don't have an option that applies to me. I identify as (please specify):

3. Ethnicity (race) that you identify with:

5. Highest level of education:

High school CEGEP Post-secondary Diploma or Certificate

Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Doctoral Degree

Other: _____

6. Official position and job title at [ORGANIZATION]:

7. Length of employment at [ORGANIZATION]:

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Appendix 4 – Consent Form**Consent Form**

Title of the study: **Millennials and the Changing Workplace: The Process of Organizational Learning**

Researcher: Mackenzie Rae Messenger
Department of Communication
Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa

Supervisor: Peruvemba S. Jaya
Department of Communication
Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Mackenzie Rae Messenger in the context of a Master's thesis.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore how Millennials experience the process of organizational learning and the significance of these findings for the future of learning in the workplace.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of attending one semi-structured interview with the researcher. My participation will last approximately one hour during which I will be asked to reflect on my experience with learning in the workplace. Conversations in the semi-structured interviews will be audio recorded.

Risks: Participation in this study requires approximately one hour of my time in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. Choosing to be interviewed within the workplace could lead to my employers and/or colleagues knowing that I have participated in the study. Otherwise, there are no known risks in participating in this study. This research is being conducted separately from the organization and choosing to participate (or not) will have no effect your relationship with your employer.

Benefits: My participation in this study will contribute to the understanding of organizational learning and how it can be tailored towards the Millennial generation. This study is designed to gain in-depth knowledge on the topic of the Millennial generation and their relationship to

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learning. This research may enhance organizational learning initiatives targeted towards Millennials in the workplace thus increasing productivity and profitability.

Confidentiality: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for purpose of this study and that my confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms that will only be shared between the researcher and the supervisor.

Anonymity: I will not be identifiable in publications or presentations unless I choose so. Should I decide to remain anonymous, I may be directly quoted from the semi-structured interviews in publications or in presentations under my pseudonym.

Please specify one of the following:

- I would like to remain an anonymous and use a pseudonym
- I would like to use my real name

Conservation of data: All data (both hard copies and electronic data, including audio-tapes, transcripts, questionnaires and notes) will be kept in the locked drawer in the researcher's house throughout the research investigation. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the raw data. After the thesis defence, the researcher's supervisor will keep a copy of the research data in her locked office from 2017 to 2022. A copy of the data will be stored at the University of Ottawa during the conservation period. After the 5-year retention period, all research data will be safely deleted and discarded.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. I also understand that should I choose to withdraw, I will be given the option to withdraw my data.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Mackenzie Rae Messenger of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Dr. Peruvemba S. Jaya.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.



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If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

Tel.: (613) 562-5387

Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 5 – Interview Protocol**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

1. Please talk to me about your experience working at this organization.
2. Describe your role at this organization.
3. Do any training and development programs exist in the organization?
 - a. What are they?
 - b. How is information expressed/distributed in these programs?
4. What was the initial training process when you began your role?
5. How do you feel your workplace is able to adapt and learn?
6. How are changes in the organization implemented?
 - a. How were you made a part of these changes?
 - b. How do you feel learning played into this process?
 - c. Were training programs introduced to ease the transition?
7. How do you learn new things at this organization?
 - a. How do you feel about this process?
8. Can you give me an example of a situation in which learning took place?
 - a. What was the context of the situation?
 - b. What had been learned?
 - c. Was/How was the learned information used?
 - d. If anything, what was different or what had changed because of this learning?
9. How do you gain your information/knowledge in the workplace?
 - a. Where do you gain it?
 - b. How do you make sense of it?

10. How is information/knowledge shared with other people?
11. How is new information/knowledge understood and interpreted?
 - a. Are there often misunderstandings amongst individuals?
 - b. When there is a misunderstanding, what is usually the reason?
 - c. How do you deal with these situations?
12. How do you decide what new information/knowledge is worth putting into action?
13. How is information stored for later use?
 - a. How is information accessed?
14. Are any organizational practices put in place to encourage learning?
 - a. If yes, can you tell me about them?
15. What are some challenges you face when learning?
 - a. How do you deal with these challenges?
16. Is learning in the organization important to you?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Would you say it's an essential workplace need?
 - c. Why?
17. Those were all the questions that I wanted to ask, thank you for your time.
 - a. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share regarding organizational learning?

Appendix 6 – Ethics Certificate

File Number: 11-16-04



Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 12/07/2016

Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
 Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Peruvemba	Jaya	Arts / Communication	Supervisor
Mackenzie Rae	Messenger	Arts / Communication	Student Researcher

File Number: 11-16-04

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: Millennials and the Changing Workplace: The Process of Organizational Learning

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
12/07/2016	12/06/2017	Approval

Special Conditions / Comments:

N/A