

Effective personal development plans contextualized: The role of the autonomy-supportive people manager in sustaining employees' self-directed learning

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Abstract

This qualitative research explores how the broader social context supports employees' self-directed learning (SDL) when using a personal development plan (PDP), focusing especially on the people manager's role. Based on deductive and inductive analysis of verbatim transcripts from 28 semi-structured interviews with employees and people managers in a non-profit organization, the study reaches three main findings. First, it confirms the key role that people managers play within PDP practices and their need to balance autonomy support, and structure, adapting their leadership style to employees. Second, it confirms the added value of PDPs for long-term learning goals and for creating a “humanitarian corridor” for personal and professional development, where efficient formal learning is complemented by informal learning activities embedded and situated in the work itself. Finally, it articulates a new conceptualization of SDL within a broader social context. These findings are complemented by practical implications and directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

autonomy support, managerial practice, PDP, personal development plan, SDL, self-directed learning

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the new world of work, where adapting to constant and rapid change is the new normal, employees need to constantly update their skillset in order to thrive in their career and support their company's performance (Reupert, 2020). By taking charge of their career, employees not only improve themselves, but they also proactively contribute to the enhancement of company work processes, products, and services in order to meet the demands of clients and surpass the competition (Zeng et al., 2020).

Self-directed learning (SDL) is about taking personal responsibility for one's own learning (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011). SDL is promoted by companies as a best practice for employees: not only to enable employees to make the most of the formal learning resources that are made available to them, but also to define a broader learning strategy that includes informal learning activities that have a positive impact on performance (Lejeune et al., 2018). To foster SDL, organizations implement processes and tools and, under the umbrella of performance and talent management, promote managerial practices that include personal development plans (PDPs) (Daunert & Price, 2014). Managerial practices related to PDPs have mainly focused on coaching and feedback (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Only a few articles on management practices have addressed how to promote SDL directly when using a PDP (Boyer et al., 2014; Rana et al., 2016).

There are two approaches to SDL in the literature. On the one hand, it is viewed as a process, on the other as a personal characteristic (Raemdonck et al., 2017; Stockdale & Brockett, 2011). The SDL readiness concept developed by Lucy Guglielmino (1978) that focuses on SDL as a personal characteristic has remained by far the most often-used conceptual model in the SDL literature (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 2011). Other researchers have referred to concepts, such as work agency (Goller, 2017) and proactiveness (Parker & Collins, 2010) in investigating SDL as a personal characteristic. When investigating SDL as a process, scholars have studied similar constructs, such as self-regulated learning (Fontana et al., 2015), feedback-seeking behavior as a form of proactive behavior (Morrison, 2002), and action regulation (Rausch, 2013). Investigations integrating both approaches have been under-represented in the research on SDL.

SDL within PDP practices entails setting up a PDP and discussing the PDP with one's supervisor (Lejeune et al., 2018). When setting up a PDP, the employee takes the initiative to reflect on learning objectives, keeping in mind career aspirations and potential learning activities to be undertaken (SDL as a process). It is assumed that employees who have a personal tendency to take an active and self-starting approach to learning and are able to overcome barriers will benefit more from PDP practices (SDL as a personal characteristic).

The literature has argued for the important role of the broader social context in supporting SDL as a personal characteristic and process. The social context plays an important role in SDL because learning happens on the job, in what Billett (2004) described as workplace participatory practices. These practices include opportunities for learning as affordances for workers, on the one hand, and how individuals purposefully identify and select these opportunities and participate in these practices in a self-directed way, on the other. The learning potential of the workplace depends on the opportunities for learning and the individual's personal agency, as well as the relationships between the individuals and their context (Tynjälä, 2008). According to Tynjälä (2008), learning is a phenomenon that is situated in a cultural and social context. How individuals learn depends not only on individual characteristics, such as self-direction and motivation, but also on the social and cultural context in which learning occurs. The literature on learning climate has also pointed to the interaction between individual and context, and thus to the situatedness of learning. Crans et al. (2022) found that learning-related leadership is one of the fundamental building blocks of a learning climate. In their study, employees perceived their supervisors as a crucial factor in establishing an environment that fosters learning. Other influential factors mentioned in the literature include having access to and resources for learning, learning and development policies, and also a culture that values learning (Crans et al., 2021; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). The pivotal role of the manager is also stressed in the literature on performance management (Quinn et al., 2021).

Because SDL means taking responsibility for one's own learning, the specific focus of this study will be on autonomy support provided by the supervisor (Baard, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2000; London & Smither, 1999). Following self-determination theory, autonomy support offered by the manager satisfies the basic need for autonomy, which is essential for investing in learning in a self-directed way and in performance. In sum, we believe that the broader social context represents an avenue for improving managerial practices in the workplace, with a focus on managerial behaviors supporting SDL and individual ownership of PDP that leads to effective PDP practices. More concretely, the aim of the study is to explore the role of the autonomy-supportive manager for employees' SDL within PDP practices, as well as for their undertaking of learning activities and job performance. The research questions are: (1) What is the role of an autonomy-supportive manager in supporting employees' SDL when making use of a PDP? and (2) What is the role of SDL within PDP practices for undertaking formal and informal learning activities and job performance?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Personal development plan practices (PDPP)

A PDP is "an assessment tool embedded in a larger assessment cycle of development and appraisal interviews, used to gather and document information about the competences the employee worked on and is planning to further develop" (Eisele et al., 2013, p. 528). It is built by the employee on the basis of existing company templates and therefore promotes individual ownership of the personal and professional learning process in the workplace, in other words, SDL (Beusaert et al., 2011). The PDP is discussed with the direct manager, whose role is to support the employee in learning and developing through their PDP practices.

SDL plays a central role in PDP practices, and research has shown that PDP use fosters SDL (Daunert & Price, 2014; Lam, 2014). Previous research has validated the relevance of this relationship, including how PDP use positively impacts the undertaking of formal and informal learning activities and performance in the workplace (Lejeune et al., 2018). With this research, we want to extend the understanding of SDL by taking a holistic perspective on SDL, including SDL as a personal characteristic as well as a process (Raemdonck et al., 2017; Stockdale & Brockett, 2011).

2.2 | Self-directed learning (SDL)

SDL is a concept that has always existed when understood as self-teaching (Carré et al., 2011). It has been getting continued and growing research attention over the last 50 years, as the demand for lifelong learning has become a permanent feature of the workplace with the rise of the knowledge economy (Fontana et al., 2015). It is a complex and multifaceted concept, in the sense that it covers different understandings, depending on the conceptual background (Carré, 2010). Within contemporary research, it has been developed mainly in two domains that have awkwardly remained relatively separate, with clear differences in the associated constructs: as SDL in the field of adult education and as self-regulated learning (SRL) in the field of educational psychology (Cosnefroy & Carré, 2014). As our study pertains to the workplace learning context, we refer to the adult education research field in this study.

Within adult education, SDL has had two meanings (Raemdonck et al., 2013): first, as a learning process:

A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes. (Knowles, 1975, p. 18)

Second, it has been viewed as a learner's set of personal attributes, such as initiative, independence, and persistence in learning, which can be assessed through scales, leading to many quantitative studies (Guglielmino, 1978; Oddi, 1986). SDL as a personal characteristic was defined by Raemdonck et al. (2008) as “a behavioral tendency to take an active and self-starting approach to learning activities and situations and to persist in overcoming barriers and setbacks to learning.” Employees who are oriented towards self-direction in learning identify learning opportunities, show learning initiative, undertake learning activities, and persevere in overcoming barriers to learning. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) defined SDL (self-direction) as a personal characteristic, as “an individual's beliefs and attitudes that predispose one towards taking primary responsibility for their learning” (p. 29), and “as a learner's desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning” (p. 24).

In an attempt to reconcile both understandings in a coherent model, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) developed the personal responsibility orientation (PRO) model of SDL (PRO-SDL). In this model, two different but complementary and related SDL dimensions fall under the umbrella of *personal responsibility*: *SDL*, the process aspect of self-direction in adult learning, describing characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction outside of the learner, and *learner self-direction*, factors internal to the individual that foster taking responsibility for one's own learning, with the justification that “these two dimensions are linked through the recognition that each emphasizes the importance of learners assuming personal responsibility for their thoughts and actions” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 33). The last element of the model is the *social context* in which learning takes place, recognizing its influence on SDL and vice versa. This new model was operationalized by Stockdale and Brockett (2011) with the PRO-SDL Scale (PRO-SDLS), which includes four latent variables: initiative and control under teaching-learning transaction (SDL); and self-efficacy and (intrinsic) motivation under learner characteristics (learner self-direction).

2.3 | Autonomy support and SDL

The social context as defined in the PRO-SDL model (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011) includes the manager, who plays a central role in PDP practices and fosters employees' SDL by offering autonomy support. The link between autonomy support and the satisfaction of the basic psychological need for autonomy is explicitly addressed in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory assumes that:

all [employees] students [...] possess inner motivational resources that can potentially allow them to engage constructively and proactively in learning activities. [...] the social context, [...] tends either to support or to thwart students' [employees'] tendencies towards internalization or intrinsic motivation. (Reeve et al., 2008, p. 228)

Autonomy support is an interpersonal behavior provided by an individual to create a sense of responsibility in learners that enhances intrinsic motivation. In the workplace, “it involves the supervisor understanding and acknowledging the subordinate's perspective, providing meaningful information in a non-manipulative manner, offering opportunities for choice, and encouraging self-initiation” (Baard et al., 2004, p. 2048).

While Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) acknowledged the importance of the social context within PRO-SDL and described its influence through institutional and cross-cultural perspectives, these lacked a strong connection with SDL and how it can be influenced by managerial relationships. People managers represent key stakeholders in the workplace context insofar as they are the main referent for employees representing the voice of the organization during day-to-day interactions, and different models exist for guiding managers' behaviors (Quinn et al., 2021). Yet, while there are also many theories around managing motivation in the workplace and specifically in relation to training and development, (Renninger & Hidi, 2019), this relationship was not taken into account within PRO-SDL (Kleinbeck et al., 1990). There is strong evidence of this relationship between autonomy support, SRL, and intrinsic motivation in the field of educational psychology, but again, this has rarely been investigated with SDL in the workplace (Schunk &

Zimmerman, 2008). For example, Baard (2002) found that managers being perceived as more autonomy-supportive and subordinates having a stronger autonomy orientation were related to the subordinates' experiences of greater intrinsic need satisfaction, which positively impacted "learner autonomous motivation." There are many organizational ways to support or frustrate employees' need for autonomy; research suggests that daily experiences with one's direct supervisor can even help to compensate for a relatively controlling organizational culture (Baard, 2002).

2.4 | Effective PDP practices for the undertaking of learning activities and job performance

PDP practices are closely connected with job performance. Job performance is an important concept in the workplace, as it connects individual performance with the achievement of organizational goals (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Two main elements represent its core structure: task performance (defined as the proficiency with which workers complete core technical tasks related to their job) and contextual performance (defined as positive behavior that indirectly participates in meeting the organization's goals; Koopmans, 2014). Task performance is often assessed in terms of the attainment of performance goals—focusing on what results are achieved through task completion, while contextual performance is assessed in terms of the development of competences—focussing on how results are achieved and how performance can be increased (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Latham et al., 2008). PDP practices and performance appraisals are closely connected within the performance management review cycle: areas for development included in the PDP often correspond with competency gaps identified during the performance reviews (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

In the workplace, PDPs include both formal and informal learning activities. Formal learning activities include:

curricular behaviors and activities pursued in service of knowledge and skill acquisition that take place within formally designated learning contexts. Such activities are organizationally sanctioned, externally directed, and are classroom- and/or course-based. Individuals generally initiate and engage in FLBs [formal learning behaviors] that correspond with activities prescribed/scheduled by a syllabus or instructor rather than by their own curiosity. They often have well established learning objectives; typically proceed in a linear fashion; and have a discrete beginning and end. (Cerasoli et al., 2017, p. 204)

Informal learning activities have often been defined in contrast to formal learning, for lack of a consensual definition; they encompass all learning activities that are not formal (Manuti et al., 2015). They include learning from oneself—for example, reflecting on ways to improve performance; learning from others—for example, learning from a mentor; and learning from non-interpersonal sources—for example, learning from searching job-related information on the internet (Noe et al., 2013). Blending formal and informal learning activities into the PDP is an effective learning strategy for increasing job performance (Lejeune et al., 2018).

There is evidence that SDL exercised within PDP practices will foster learning activities (Abrami et al., 2013) and that SDL defined as a personal characteristic is correlated with competence development (Aho et al., 2015). Both SDL as a personal characteristic and SDL as a process have also been linked to increased job performance (Lejeune et al., 2018).

3 | RESEARCH PURPOSE

Relationships between the variables we have introduced above have been studied separately (Baard et al., 2004; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008; Stockdale & Brockett, 2011). How these different variables interact with each other in

an overall explanatory model in a workplace setting is yet unknown. With this research, we explore such an overall model, focusing especially on how SDL can be supported by managerial practices when working with a PDP and what the role of SDL within PDP practices is for the undertaking of formal and informal learning activities and job performance (see Figure 1). To study the “how” behind these relations, we have used qualitative research, as it is suited “for addressing ‘how’ questions—rather than ‘how many’; for understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e., informants); and for examining and articulating processes” (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). Both SDL and informal learning have often been linked to individual, reflective processes that can best be understood by inquiring about people's past learning experiences (Eraut, 2004). We therefore used semi-structured interviews based on the research model being explored (see Figure 1), the results of which were analyzed using both a deductive and inductive approach. The deductive approach was used to confirm the model; the inductive approach was used to “explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” and to further untangle and extend the variables under study (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51).

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 | Research context and background

4.1.1 | Organization

This research was conducted at the Brussels-based headquarters of a non-governmental organization (NGO) with 400 employees. An NGO is an organization that is independent from the government, is mission-driven, and that focuses in one way or another on a social interest. It offers services that might not be viable in a for-profit context. Like many other NGOs, this organization is active in the field of emergency medical assistance to victims of war,

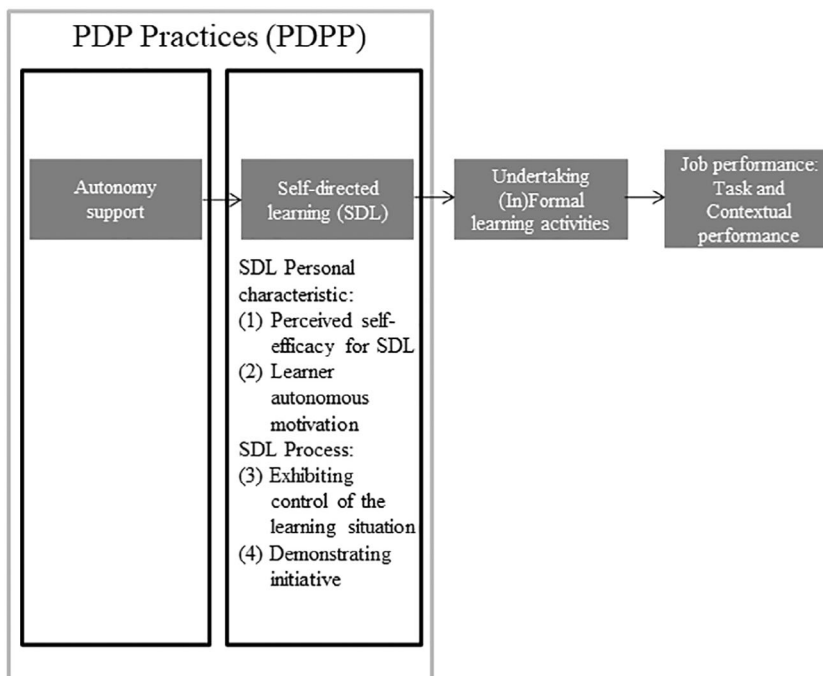


FIGURE 1 Research model

catastrophes, and epidemics. Employees from the headquarters mainly work in support functions (logistics, finance, fund-raising, communication, etc.).

One year before the data collection started, the company had implemented a new performance management system that included PDPs. PDPs were used on a voluntary basis and were completed by 62 employees. The implementation of such a professional development practice is in line with the trend of professionalization of NGOs, including more efficient management of human resources and better career management practices (Ryfman, 2007).

4.1.2 | Participants

The 62 employees who had a PDP and their managers (60 individuals) were invited to take part in the research on a voluntary basis. People managers are direct supervisors of employees. Twenty-eight individuals agreed to take part

TABLE 1 List of interviewees with demographic information

Interview #	Role	Age range	Diploma	Gender	Role tenure range	Company tenure range
1	Employee	Missing	Master's	Male	1–5	11–20
2	Employee	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	1–5
3	People manager	40–49	Master's	Female	1–5	6–10
4	Employee	30–39	Bachelor's	Female	1–5	6–10
5	Employee	50–59	Secondary school	Female	6–10	11–20
6	Employee	40–49	PhD	Female	1–5	11–20
7	People manager	30–39	Master's	Male	1–5	6–10
8	Employee	40–49	Bachelor's	Female	6–10	6–10
9	Employee	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	6–10
10	People manager	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	11–20
11	People manager	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	6–10
12	Employee	40–49	Master's	Male	1–5	1–5
13	Employee	20–29	Master's	Male	1–5	1–5
14	Employee	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	6–10
15	Employee	30–39	Master's	Male	1–5	1–5
16	People manager	40–49	Bachelor's	Male	1–5	1–5
17	Employee	40–49	Master's	Male	1–5	1–5
18	Employee	40–49	Bachelor's	Male	11–15	11–20
19	People manager	40–49	Bachelor's	Female	1–5	6–10
20	Employee	40–49	Master's	Female	1–5	11–20
21	People manager	30–39	Master's	Male	1–5	6–10
22	People manager	40–49	Bachelor's	Male	1–5	11–20
23	Employee	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	1–5
24	Employee	60–65	Master's	Female	6–10	21–30
25	People manager	50–59	Bachelor's	Female	1–5	11–20
26	Employee	50–59	Master's	Female	1–5	11–20
27	Employee	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	1–5
28	People manager	30–39	Master's	Female	1–5	1–5

in the research, 18 women (64.3%), and 10 men (35.7%). Ten participants were in a people-manager role, and 18 were employees. Further details about the participants are available in Table 1.

4.2 | Data collection

This qualitative research was based on semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was structured around the research model (Figure 1) and can be found in Appendix A. A funneling technique was used to conduct the interviews, starting with more general and open-ended questions around the organization's PDP practices ("Could you please explain how personal development plans are used in your organization? How do they work?"), then asking more specific and sometimes closed-ended questions when relevant, namely, to check specific aspects of the research model that were not spontaneously mentioned by the interviewee. Questions were formulated slightly differently depending on the role (employee or people manager); for example, "How do you decide what will go in your PDP?" and "How do employees decide what will go in their PDP?" As part of the introduction to the interview, we asked the interviewee to refer as much as possible to one concrete example from their past when answering, to anchor their answers in their day-to-day workplace reality. Interviews were conducted in English (13) or French (15), depending on the language spoken by the interviewee. On average, the interviews lasted 40 min, with a minimum of 25 min and a maximum of 1 h. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were used as data for the analysis. Transcripts were anonymized, with references to names or elements that could lead to identifying people or the organization removed, to safeguard privacy. In identifying the sources of quotes from the interviews, the number indicates the interview number (see Table 1), "E" indicates an employee, and "PM" indicates a people manager.

4.3 | Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and interpreted. The first author divided the interview transcripts into meaningful units and assigned them codes, using Atlas.ti, version 8. The coding was done using a combination of pre-determined (a priori, based on the theoretical framework; deductive coding) and emergent (inductive coding) codes. These codes were grouped together into higher order thematic groups according to conceptual similarities (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). See Table 2 for the detailed codes and their definitions. In a final step leading to our results, we looked for similarities, differences, and cross-interpretation between the interviews. Preliminary interpretations were discussed between the authors to avoid interpretation bias.

5 | RESULTS

Table 3 gives an overview of the frequencies of meaningful units per theme. Six themes emerged clearly from the analysis, from least salient to most salient:

1. Job performance
2. Undertaking of formal and informal learning activities;
3. Self-directed learning;
4. The key role of the people manager: autonomy support.
5. PDP effectiveness: the relation between PDPP, learning and job performance;
6. The role of the broader social context: organizational factors impacting PDP practices.

TABLE 2 From constructs to deductive and inductive codes

1. Deductive codes		
Construct	Full definition	Examples from the literature cited in the definition
Perceived autonomy support	Autonomy support refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor related to the supervisor (or anyone supporting the employee's learning process) understanding and acknowledging the subordinate's perspective, providing meaningful information in a nonmanipulative manner, offering opportunities for choice, and encouraging self-initiation (Baard et al., 2004, p. 2048)	I feel that my manager provides me choices and options. I feel understood by my manager. My manager conveyed confidence in my ability to do well at my job. My manager encouraged me to ask questions. My manager listens to how I would like to do things. My manager tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things.
SDL_perceived selfefficacy for SDL	Perceived self-efficacy for Self-Directed Learning refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor related to the employee's confidence in their ability to take charge of the learning process within Personal Development Plan (PDP) Practices (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011)	I am confident in my ability to consistently motivate myself. I am very confident in my ability to independently prioritize my learning goals. I am very convinced I have the ability to take personal control of my learning. I am really uncertain about my capacity to take primary responsibility for my learning. I am unsure about my ability to independently find materials for my own learning. I do not have much confidence in my ability to independently carry out my development plan.
SDL_learner autonomous motivation	Learner autonomous motivation relates to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor that depicts personal motivation for learning from the employee within PDP practices, either because it is personally enjoyable in itself or because it strongly connects to something personally meaningful for the employee (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011)	My professional development is strongly connected with my personal goals and interests. I complete most of my professional learning activities because I WANT to, not because I HAVE to. Most of the work I do for my learning activities is personally enjoyable or seems relevant to my reasons for my professional development.
Code name/label	Full definition	Examples from the literature cited in the definition
SDL_exhibiting control of learning situation	Exhibiting control of the learning situation relates to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor that relates to the employee being in charge of the organization of the learning process (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011)	If I'm not getting what I would like out of a course, I always independently make the changes necessary for improvement. I always effectively take responsibility for my own learning. I am very successful at prioritizing my learning goals. I always effectively organize my professional development time.
SDL_demonstrating initiative	Demonstrating initiative in the learning situation relates to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor that explains that the employee takes personal initiatives, beyond what is expected or	I would rather take the initiative to learn new things rather than wait for my manager to foster new learning. I often use materials I've found on my own to help me in learning.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Code name/label	Full definition	Examples from the literature cited in the definition
	required from them in the learning process (Stockdale & Brockett, 2011)	Even after a course is over, I often continue to spend time learning about the topic. I often collect additional information about interesting topics even after the course has ended. I frequently do extra work in a course just because I am interested.
ULA_formal learning	Formal learning refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor referring to any formal learning behaviors (FLBs), that is, "curricular behaviors and activities pursued in service of knowledge and skill acquisition that take place within formally designated learning contexts. Such activities are organizationally sanctioned, externally directed, and are classroom- and/or course-based. Individuals generally initiate and engage in FLBs that correspond with activities prescribed/scheduled by a syllabus or instructor rather than by their own curiosity. They often have well established learning objectives; typically proceed in a linear fashion; and have a discrete beginning and end" (Cerasoli et al., 2017, p. 204).	Taking part in a course or training Completing an e-learning course
ULA_informal learning	Informal learning refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor referring to any informal learning activities (Noe et al., 2013), namely: • Learning from oneself • Learning from others • Learning from non-interpersonal sources	Items included: reflecting about how to improve my performance, experimenting with new ways of performing my work, using trial-and-error strategies to learn and better perform (learning from oneself); interacting with a mentor, interacting with my supervisors, interacting with my peers (learning from others); and reading professional magazines and vendor publications, searching the Internet for job-relevant information, reading management books (learning from non-interpersonal sources)
Job performance_task performance	Task performance refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor referring to the proficiency with which the employee completes core technical tasks related to their job (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993)	New tasks are completed or work efficiency increases.
Job performance_contextual performance	Contextual performance refers to any statement from the employee or the employee's supervisor referring to positive behavior that indirectly contributes to the goals of the organization (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993)	New behaviors are demonstrated.

TABLE 2 (Continued) (Continues)

2. Inductive codes	
Code name/label	Full definition
Organizational factors impacting PDP practices	Marsick and Watkins' model (2003) describing the seven dimensions of the learning organization: Create continuous learning opportunities Promote inquiry and dialogue Encourage collaboration and team learning Create systems to capture and share learning Empower people towards a collective vision Connect the organization to its environment Provide strategic leadership for learning
The key role of the people manager	Following-up Giving structure Differentiating approach

TABLE 3 List of variables from the research model with the number of interviews in which the code for the variable was assigned to quote(s)

Variable	Total number of meaningful units coded for the variable across all interviews	Number of interviews where the variable was referenced (out of 28 total)
Perceived autonomy support	89	23
SDL – demonstrating Initiative	50	19
SDL – exhibiting control of the learning situation	59	20
SDL– learner autonomous motivation	48	20
SDL– perceived self-efficacy for SDL	27	18
Undertaking learning activities – formal	54	21
Undertaking learning activities – informal	77	27
Job performance – contextual Performance	36	21
Job performance – task performance	29	19

Note: A meaningful unit can be coded for more than one variable.

We will discuss the themes in the following order: job performance; the undertaking of learning activities (outcomes); SDL (in PDP practices); the manager and autonomy support (in PDP practices); PDP effectiveness: the relation between the PDPP, learning and job performance; and the role of the broader social context. The last theme was the only one that was inductively generated.

5.1 | Job performance

Quotes related to job performance variables were the least frequent, and interviewees felt uncomfortable talking about performance. First, interviewees reported that task performance is best measured indirectly: increased confidence in the role, taking up more complex tasks, changes in the way of working, or behavioral changes. There were few meaningful units related to direct performance measurements, such as increased productivity or the quality of deliverables. Finally, interviewees reported that improved performance is related to “natural” performance improvement based on experience or continuous learning, which they did not necessarily relate to the deliberate undertaking of learning activities.

Second, similar findings were observed when analyzing the meaningful units related to contextual performance. An indirect measure of contextual performance was self-reflection.

If it's to talk about me, I miss formal, ok yes I definitely improved my public speaking by 20%, I don't know - I can say that. [...] Because I felt that was ok, so, the answer is yes. I have a feeling, since I am a reflective learner, it makes me answer yes. but it's not formal (17.).

Other indirect measures were feedback from colleagues and increased self-confidence.

As with task performance, competency development was seen as a natural process that derives from experience.

5.2 | Undertaking of formal and informal learning activities

First, interviewees gave many examples of the formal learning activities discussed in their PDP; most meaningful units were related to the efficiency of those training.

Second, many meaningful units of informal learning activities were identified. A first group of quotes emphasized the importance of learning from others. Actively seeking feedback from the people manager, colleagues, a mentor, or a “buddy” was one important type of informal learning activity. Feedback could happen in a formal setting, but was more often sought informally. Feedback could take place in a one-to-one setting, but also in a group setting in which reflection on errors took place and colleagues served as a sounding board.

A second group of meaningful units related to learning from work-related situations. This encompasses learning by doing, by putting things learned into practice or learning from mistakes, by oneself or with others:

I had a small idea, but it allowed me to put into practice the ideas that I had and there were things that we did badly, there were mistakes that we made but that we realised on the spot and that allowed me to see “OK, so we'll have to do this a bit differently”. (9.E, translated from French)

Sometimes learning by doing could be deliberately assigned by the manager, for targeting a specific learning goal.

I'm trying to steer him towards more cross-cutting files, which I'll give him throughout the year... You know with files throughout the year and so and so that forces him to go to the other departments, (21.PM, translated from French).

A third group of units referred to learning from non-interpersonal sources, especially online resources. One employee, for example, learned through YouTube:

Sometimes I look for the little self-learning on YouTube to learn just one thing and to see it once or twice and understand how to do it. (5.E)

5.3 | Self-directed learning

SDL variables received mixed attention in quotes from interviewees. SDL: Exhibiting Control of the Learning Situation (SDL Control) and SDL: Learner Autonomous Motivation (SDL Motivation) were mentioned more often than SDL: Perceived Self-Efficacy for SDL (SDL Self-Efficacy) and SDL: Demonstrating Initiative (SDL Initiative). In other words, interviewees talked more often about their motivation to learn and their ability to control their learning (SDL

as a personal characteristic) and less about feeling able to successfully accomplish a learning activity and the initiatives they take in order to learn (SDL as a process).

Interviewees acknowledged taking control over determining their learning goals and learning activities. The choice of certain learning goals and/or related learning activities was based on the employees' needs:

And I think that what brings me to want to attend some trainings is because I think things could be done in a better way or I am missing the tools and hoping that the training will provide the tools needed to better achieve what is on my plate. (15.E)

The effectiveness and impact of the learning activity was also a criterion interviewees used for selecting an activity. However, sometimes their choice was based on personal interest or coincidence:

Really by opportunity. Email received with [a training proposal about] change management. Yes, why not. Next week, I will walk by the library and if I see a change management book, I will buy the book. No strategy. (17.E)

However, taking control also included negotiations with the manager about the self-set learning goals and/or learning activities to be undertaken. Contextual factors, such as the available time and training offered, also limited choice-making regarding learning goals and activities.

Quotes related to SDL motivation included a fair number related to learning that was personally enjoyable or useful or meaningful—either because it was useful for the job or for instrumental reasons, for example, to achieve career goals. SDL Initiative was found less often and was mostly present in quotes that were very aligned with the theory, depicting learning beyond what is expected by the organization (self-initiated learning during personal time, learning beyond the scope of work, learning from resources outside the organization). Finally, SDL self-efficacy was least mentioned; quotes related to this showed that self-efficacy was driven by having occupational expertise, by being curious, or through self-knowledge.

5.4 | The key role of the people manager: Autonomy support

The importance of the role of the people manager in the PDP process was highlighted across interviews, by both people managers and employees. References to this role were found in relation to the Perceived Autonomy Support variable in the research model. The role of the people manager was perceived quite unanimously as key by participants. More precisely, interviewees expected people managers to provide ongoing regular support through daily/weekly discussions, rather informal in nature and embedded in the flow of work. This contributed to the employee's development. At the same time, the importance of these meetings was highlighted by employees who did not have those kinds of meetings because their current manager did not organize them. They indicated that these meetings would have been especially welcome after having undertaken learning activities. These discussions were mostly informal and not tracked; they were organized whenever needed. Managers indicated that during the follow-up meetings, the focus lies on the individual employee, his or her competencies, and professional career. Employees expected more psychological support than technical support with the tool. Finally, this follow-up would benefit from more systematic implementation across the organization, by introducing guidelines for managers or people manager training.

The quality of the relationship with the manager as well as having trust in your manager were important to enable working on a PDP. For the manager, it was a matter of building an atmosphere that was supportive to learning, insofar as it enabled emotional commitment. It was also about leaving employees the space they need to develop themselves and avoiding control/micro-management. If such conditions were met, setting up a PDP in co-creation became possible. Sometimes the manager gave advice, but in a non-directive manner.

On top of the importance of autonomy support provided during regular informal follow-up meetings, providing structure as a manager was another key theme that emerged. Observable behaviors related to giving structure included clear communication of expectations about learning activities, providing the employee with a variety of potential actions to be taken, and providing constructive feedback. Employees expected similar behaviors from the people managers. First, the people manager would give direction and guide the employee in a particular direction, pushing them outside of their comfort zone when they were ready to take on new responsibilities, creating socio-cognitive conflict to drive learning:

I know back then, what pushed me into this plan, was really my direct line manager and the people that were available in the HR department to explain what were the different possibilities. I really wouldn't have done it by myself, so it is really to have someone coaching you and telling you the possibilities. This helped a lot. (14.E)

Direction and guidance given by the manager led to common agreement on learning goals. Once the learning goals were defined, the people manager had the task to organize the follow-up: reminding employees about agreements when the employee did not implement certain agreed-upon behavior or job-related changes or checking on progress in completing learning goals. Finally, providing structure also meant providing constructive feedback related to the learning goals formulated.

In sum, interviewees argued that the role of the manager is to find a balance between autonomy-support and structure. To do so, managers need to adjust their leadership style according to the employee's profile, for example, by taking into account the employee's maturity or performance readiness. Several quotes from interviewees matched this logic, for example:

It depends on the person, because everyone is different. So, you need to approach them in different ways. [...] It's a way of approaching. (3.PM)

5.5 | PDP effectiveness: The role of PDP practices for undertaking learning activities and job performance

The results also showed that much workplace learning was not planned, despite the implementation of a formal practice, such as a PDP.

I think less than half the trainings I follow are part of my formalized development plan. (13.E)

Much formal and informal learning was based on opportunities that arose, and was not connected to the PDP. Employees did not feel the need to formalize learning activities, which occurred naturally. Such learning was useful for the job, relevant at one point in time, or was found to be interesting by the employee:

Things happened naturally through discussion, through exchange. Every time a problem arose, I discussed it with him so that we could find a solution together and that was that. (11.PM, translated from French)

It's more punctual, if there is a need for my work, I look for a training. So, it is not something I formalized. (13.E)

This did not discredit PDP practices; according to interviewees, both planned and incidental learning are needed. It rather shows the complementarity of both forms of learning, inside and outside of PDP practices, which need to be balanced. Two main reasons for the added value of PDPs were highlighted. First, they created room for talking about

both personal and professional development: the PDP created a setting for open dialogue and feedback around development areas and learning goals. Second, PDPs enabled the follow-up of the development of learning goals across a longer period of time and enabled keeping track of steps taken that would otherwise have been unnoticed.

5.6 | Organizational factors impacting PDP practices

The next theme concerns the social context, more specifically, organizational factors impacting PDP practices. First, meaningful units related to creating continuous learning opportunities referred to tension within the organization. On the one hand, interviewees highlighted the many formal learning opportunities available within the organization related to onboarding or continuous training:

I think it's a lot of training and learning opportunities compared to private companies or other NGO. (18.E)

However, interviewees indicated that training for niche or non-core business functions was missing. On the other hand, formal learning activities were not always seen as a priority, in comparison to work-related activities. The organization was characterized as having an emergency culture, having to deal flexibly with occurring events: "There is this tendency in [name of organization], as I believe in many organizations, to be um ... always overwhelmed, always in a hurry, which is very strong here! Here we are in an emergency organization" (7 p.m., translated from French). Because of the emergency culture, the focus was on informal, incidental learning and not on formal learning activities designed with the sole purpose of learning. Informal learning better supported the organization's priorities. In turn, learning goals included in the PDP got less attention, and thus, a lack of time for learning was frequently cited as the main roadblock concerning working on the PDP.

Second, the interviewees referred to creating systems and tools to capture and share learning. While there were established HR processes in place for assessing job performance, the PDP was not integrated into existing HR systems and was not sufficiently user-friendly. When employees completed formal and informal learning activities, there was also often no assessment of learning outcomes and of the transfer of what was learned to the workplace:

[after taking a training in French] And no follow-up on how good my French speaking became like. In general, we say in [name of the organization] whatever you go for, you can get. But no one really... I didn't have clear objectives from the organization on what they wanted me to achieve... [with the language training]. (4.E)

Furthermore, there was no competence profile related to job functions or titles that might facilitate the identification of learning goals.

Third, a group of meaningful units referred to the "hugging culture," implying that there were no consequences for not committing to and achieving objectives. Because of the hugging culture, the exchange of feedback was lacking.

Fourth, collaboration and team learning was an emerging theme. It was highlighted that working with colleagues during field missions abroad could create strong ties between colleagues, which enabled more exchange of feedback between colleagues.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With this research, we have explored how the social context supports SDL when making use of a PDP, especially focusing on the autonomy support offered by the manager. In addition, this study conceptualized SDL as both a person-related characteristic and a process. Previous research mostly conceptualized SDL either as a person-related characteristic or as a

process, but not both. Transcripts from semi-structured interviews of employees and people managers were analyzed using both a deductive and inductive approach, with narratives built around thematic analysis.

6.1 | Theoretical contributions

This study makes three important theoretical contributions. The first theoretical contribution relates to the key role that people managers play within PDP practices. When discussing the manager's role in autonomy support (Baard et al., 2004), employees insisted on the importance of building trust and a relationship to create two-way discussions about their PDPs. Furthermore, the value of informal and regular checkpoints was highlighted. Regular and informal follow-up meetings are beneficial if implemented consistently across the organization, for example, through formal guidelines on PDP practices and people manager training.

The participants also highlighted the role of people managers in providing structure to complement autonomy support. This means that managers need to push their employees outside of their comfort zone, agree on learning goals, follow up on the completion of the goals, and give constructive feedback. While the roles of both structure and autonomy support have been extensively studied in educational psychology, more specifically in the field of teaching (Jang et al., 2010; Sierens et al., 2009), the balance between autonomy support and providing structure has been less studied with managers and employees in the workplace.

Finally, managers are expected to adapt their leadership style to employees, depending on the employees' maturity or performance readiness (Hersey et al., 2012); more specifically, they should balance autonomy support and structure. The model under study could be refined to better reflect the people manager's role in PDP practices and in supporting employees to define learning goals and actions, in line with their profiles and career aspirations.

The second theoretical contribution concerns the added value of the PDP, which creates the possibility of discussing personal and professional development, opening up the dialogue, and exchanging feedback on areas for development and learning goals. The PDP also enables focusing on learning goals over a longer period of time through follow-up. The PDP goes further than learning naturally: "Individual learning is sometimes conscious, deliberative, intentional, in which cases it can be examined through choices, activities, learning designs and processes" (Marsick, 2009, p. 273). It also allows reflection on how the learning fits into the employee's broader career trajectory. Formalizing PDP processes and training the employees and managers involved in using the PDP is therefore important and relevant. Interviewees also acknowledged the importance of formal learning activities for the PDP, especially if they enable efficient learning. Informal learning activities were seen as even more efficient than formal learning activities, because of their flexibility and integration into daily practice. In particular, feedback obtained from colleagues, from an individual or from a group of peers, as well as learning from work-related situations and learning by doing were seen as effective. Task-based learning with a clear learning goal was also sometimes assigned by the people manager, which is in line with literature on the transfer of training (Govaerts & Dochy, 2014). These findings reinforced Marsick's view on informal learning, especially regarding how much it is embedded and situated in the work itself (Marsick, 2009).

Finally, the third theoretical contribution lies in how SDL was conceptualized, including both SDL as a person-related characteristic and SDL as a process. Interviewees talked more about SDL as a personal characteristic. They conveyed interesting nuances related to SDL Control, highlighting that the choice of learning goals and learning activities was often based on opportunities, as well as on the relevance and effectiveness of learning activities, but was often negotiated with the people manager, echoing the two-way discussion logic brought forward for autonomy support and the logic of negotiation of power among actors (Poell et al., 2000). They commented that SDL Self-Efficacy was driven by expertise in a knowledge area, curiosity, and knowing yourself. Quotes related to SDL Motivation and SDL Initiative were aligned with the existing theory, in the sense that quotes from the interviewees merely nuance the examples from the literature found in the coding table (see Table 2). Lastly, the seven dimensions of the learning organization from Marsick and Watkins (2003) fit nicely with a number of statements made by interviewees. The seven dimensions of the learning organization are: (1) create continuous learning opportunities; (2) promote

inquiry and dialogue; (3) encourage collaboration and team learning; (4) create systems to capture and share learning; (5) empower people towards a collective vision; (6) connect the organization to its environment; and (7) provide strategic leadership for learning. These dimensions complement the research model with further contextual factors beyond autonomy support, and emphasize their impact. Such organizational factors might influence outcome variables in the model beyond the individual variables and might be easier to manipulate (Marsick, 2009).

6.2 | Practical implications

While companies know the key role of people managers and what competencies they need to develop to be effective (Quinn et al., 2021), this research brings forward a new set of competencies and behaviors required to support effective PDP practices. People managers should find the right balance between autonomy support and structure to help employees define a learning strategy within the framework of their PDP, making a connection with well-established leadership styles models (Hersey et al., 2012). Beyond people managers, the seven dimensions of the learning organization from Marsick and Watkins (2003) give a clear framework for supporting PDP in the workplace. According to Marsick (2009), these dimensions might be easier to manipulate but will require a change in the learning culture of the organization, including people managers' training. Finally, our research reasserts the role of PDPs as a tool for making room for longer term development goals, supported by a learning strategy that includes both efficient formal learning activities and informal learning activities embedded into the work itself. Many concrete examples of how to do this were provided by participants in the research. Beyond refinements of Noe et al.'s (2013) model, especially around individual and group feedback, they clearly articulated the need for the people manager to set clear learning goals for some working tasks assigned with a learning purpose. Efficient PDP practices require frequent follow-up through informal and regular checkpoints.

6.3 | Limitations and directions for future research

This research was conducted with a limited number of participants in one specific sector (NGO), and should be extended across various workplace situations to be generalized. While it opens the way for further research to confirm the role of a new conceptualization of SDL within the framework of PDP practices and how it can be supported by variables related to the social context, causal links between variables need to be confirmed with quantitative research, preferably including an intervention. Moreover, although the study provides new insight in the role of autonomy-support and self-directed learning when using a PDP, the fact that participants initially volunteered to complete PDPs and then volunteered again to participate in the study may be an indication of their interest and enthusiasm for the PDP practice. Therefore, the data researched might represent a substed of motivated employees and not be representative for the whole population. Finally, we opted for only one conceptual model of SDL. Different models currently exist, and their relevance should be compared and tested, including their measurement. More specifically, while this research is connected to the broader concept of agency at work—SDL being a specific instance of agency—further research should strive to increase the integration of the long-standing concept of SDL within research on agency (Goller & Paloniemi, 2017); it could also further connect SRL and SDL research, although they come from different research fields. This could be done, among other ways, by evaluating the relevance of including variables from these related research fields and operationalizing them in a workplace setting.

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE (ENGLISH VERSION)

Variable	Question	Additional questions
Demographic questions	• Gender • What is your age? • What is your level of education? • What country do you work in? • How long have you been working with the company? • What is your job function? Does it include a people management role? • How long have you been working in your current function?	

A.1. | People-manager version

Variable	Question	Additional questions
PDP practices	Could you please explain how Personal Development Plans (PDPs) are used in your organization? How does it work?	Who does what and when? What is the goal of PDP in your organization? Why is there a PDP?
Self-directed learning (SDL) - process (setting goals)	• How do employees decide what will go in their PDP? • How do they define learning goals?	
SDL - initiative & control	• To what extent does an employee take the initiative to complete their PDP? • How effective are your direct reports in organizing your personal development?	• What do they do? How do they do it?
SDL - self-efficacy & motivation	• How confident are they about filling in their PDP? • Why do they complete your PDP? What motivates them in defining and completing their PDP? • To what extent do you think they will develop the skills that they targeted in their PDP?	How capable do you think they feel in building their PDP?
SDL – process (monitoring and evaluation)	• How often do they update your PDP? What do they do when they update their PDP? [If not updated] Why did not they update their PDP? • To what extent do they track learning activities related to their learning goals in their PDP? How do they do this? [If not tracked] Why did not they track learning activities in their PDP? • To what extent do they assess outcomes of learning activities related to their learning goals in your PDP? How do they do this? [If not tracked] Why did not they assess learning activities outcomes in their PDP?	When do they decide to adjust their goals, plan, learning activities to be undertaken?
Engagement in learning activities	• What types of learning activities do they include in their PDP? • How do they choose learning activities for their learning goals? • How do they choose the order of learning activities?	• How do they decide which type of learning activities are most effective to reach their learning (sub)goals in their PDP? • To what extent do they include formal learning activities (training, courses, seminars...)? How do they choose formal learning activities? What do they do once they have attended the formal learning activity? • To what extent do they use feedback from others to feed their PDP? Who do they ask for information/feedback? How do they use the information/feedback they received from others? • To what extent do they use on the job learning activities in your PDP (experimenting, learning from mistakes, reflecting, projects or problems you meet,

Variable	Question	Additional questions
		new assignments...)? How do they use them in their PDP? - Do they reflect/evaluate on how they performed a task, and how they can adjust to improve their performance? - To what extent do they use books and the internet to learn? - Do they plan those activities in advance?
Autonomy support	- What is your role as supervisor in this PDP process? - What do you do? - How much room do you leave to your direct reports with regards to their PDP? - How supportive are you regarding their PDP?	- Do your employees have regular development conversations with you? - What do you do to leave room for your direct reports? Do you leave them with choice and options? - What do you do to support your direct reports? Do you encourage them? Do you try to understand their perspective? Do you listen to their opinion/ideas/propositions on how they would like to do things with regard to their PDP?
Performance	What was the impact of your direct report's PDP? Did you notice any impact?	- Did you notice any impact on their competencies development? - Did you notice any impact on their job performance?

A.2. | Employee version

Variable	Question	Additional questions
PDP practices	Could you please explain how Personal Development Plans (PDPs) are used in your organization? How does it work?	Who does what and when? What is the goal of PDP in your organization? Why is there a PDP?
Self-directed learning (SDL) - Process (setting goals)	- How do you decide what will go in your PDP? - How do you define learning goals?	
SDL - initiative & control	- To what extent do you take the initiative to complete your PDP? - How effective are you in organizing your personal development?	What did you do? How did you do it?
SDL - self-efficacy & motivation	- How confident are you about filling in your PDP? - Why did you complete your PDP? What motivates you in defining and completing your PDP? - To what extent do you think you will develop the skills that you targeted in your PDP?	How capable do you feel in building your PDP?
SDL - process (monitoring and evaluation)	How often do you update your PDP? What do you do when you update your PDP? [If not updated] Why did not you update your PDP?	When do you decide to adjust your goals, plan, and learning activities to be undertaken?

(Continues)

Variable	Question	Additional questions
	- To what extent do you track learning activities related to your learning goals in your PDP? How do you do this? [If not tracked] Why you did not track learning activities in your PDP? - To what extent do you assess outcomes of learning activities related to your learning goals in your PDP? How do you do this? [If not tracked] Why you did not assess learning activities outcomes in your PDP?	
Engagement in learning activities	- What types of learning activities do you include in your PDP? - How do you choose learning activities for your learning goals? - How do you choose the order of learning activities?	- How do you decide which type of learning activities are most effective to reach your learning (sub)goals in your PDP? - To what extent do you include formal learning activities (training, courses, seminars...)? How do you choose formal learning activities? What do you do once you have attended the formal learning activity? - To what extent do you use feedback from others to feed your PDP? Who do you ask for information/feedback? How do you use the information/feedback you received from others? - To what extent do you use on the job learning activities in your PDP (experimenting, learning from mistakes, reflecting, projects or problems you meet, new assignments...)? How do you use them in your PDP? - To what extent do you use books and the internet to learn? - Do you plan those activities in advance?
Autonomy support	- What is the role of your supervisor in this PDP process? - What do they do? - How much room does your supervisor leave you with regards to your PDP? - How supportive is your manager regarding your PDP?	- Do you have regular development conversations with your supervisor? - What does your supervisor do to leave you room? Did they leave you with choice and options? - What does your supervisor do to support you? Does your manager encourage you? Does he/she try to understand your perspective? Does he/she listen to your opinion/ideas/propositions on how you would like to do things with regard to your PDP?
Performance	What was the impact of your PDP? Did you notice any impact?	- Did you notice any impact on your competencies development? - Did you notice any impact on your job performance?