

Exploring the Role of Employee Competence and Learning Agility in Supporting Organizational Adaptation in the Disruption Era: A Qualitative Study in Indonesia

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Abstract: The disruptive era, marked by accelerated digitalization, globalization, and market uncertainty, requires organizations to develop stronger adaptive capacities than ever before. Organizational adaptation is not merely a matter of structural changes and strategic alignment but is also largely determined by human resource factors. This study aims to explore in depth the role of employee competence and learning agility in supporting organizational adaptation in the disruptive era. A qualitative approach was employed with a case study strategy involving several organizations in the service and manufacturing sectors undergoing digital transformation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with employees and managers, participatory observation, and internal document analysis. Data analysis was conducted thematically to identify patterns of relationships among competence, learning agility, and organizational adaptation. Findings reveal that employee competence extends beyond technical skills to encompass soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and complex problem-solving. Learning agility emerges as a reinforcing factor that enables employees to leverage past experiences to address new challenges. Organizations that successfully adapt are those capable of synergizing employee competence with a learning culture that fosters agility. This study contributes to the human resource management literature, particularly in the Indonesian context, by emphasizing the importance of not only competence development but also the cultivation of ecosystems that support continuous learning. Practically, the study underscores the need for organizations to respond to disruption not merely by surviving but by innovating and leading in the market.

Keywords: Employee Competence, Learning Agility, Organizational Adaptation, Disruptive Era, Qualitative Study

I. Introduction

The disruptive era poses profound challenges for organizations worldwide, including those in Indonesia. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, the rapid acceleration of digitalization triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergence of new technology-driven business models have fundamentally reshaped competitive landscapes (Christensen et al., 2018). These changes demand not only innovation in products and services but also transformations in organizational work systems to become more adaptive and responsive to external dynamics. Within this context, human resources emerge as a highly strategic factor. Employee competence—encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes—serves as the fundamental foundation shaping organizational performance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). However, recent studies highlight that technical competence alone is insufficient for addressing disruptive challenges. Soft skills such as communication, cross-cultural collaboration, and critical thinking are increasingly crucial (Kuncoro, 2022).

In addition to competence, learning agility has gained prominence in contemporary management literature. Individuals with high learning agility are capable of quickly drawing lessons from experience, adapting to change, and capitalizing on opportunities amid uncertainty (DeRue et al., 2012). Wardhani et al. (2022) found that employees with strong learning agility are better prepared to face digital transformation. However, challenges arise when organizations lack a learning-oriented culture, thereby hindering the optimal development of learning agility (Rahmawati & Sudarsono, 2021).

Critiques of prior research reveal a tendency to examine these variables in isolation. Some studies focus solely on competence without considering learning agility, while others emphasize learning agility without addressing foundational competence (Wijyanthi, 2019; Setiawan, 2023). In reality, the combination of both is critical for shaping sustainable organizational adaptation. Based on these phenomena and research gaps, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore how competence and learning agility interact to support organizational adaptation in the disruptive era, with particular focus on the Indonesian context. The study seeks to contribute theoretically by enriching the human resource management literature and practically by offering strategic recommendations for organizations navigating continuous change.

II. Literature Review

Employee Competence

Employee competence has long been recognized as a central concept in human resource management. Spencer and Spencer (1993) define competence as the underlying characteristics of an individual related to effective performance at work, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In the modern context, competence is viewed not only as technical expertise but also as adaptive ability to face complex challenges (Boyatzis, 2008).

Qualitative studies in Indonesia highlight the sociocultural dimension of competence. Wijayanthi (2019), for instance, found that competence development in the public sector is shaped more by social interaction and organizational culture than by formal training. Similarly, Fárezino (2024) demonstrated that innovative competence determines manufacturing firms' success in addressing global market pressures. However, critiques of traditional competence approaches reveal an overemphasis on hard skills while neglecting soft skills (Kuncoro, 2022). In fact, Setiawan (2023) showed that soft skills such as intergenerational communication and collaboration are more decisive for successful organizational adaptation in the disruptive era. This suggests that competence must be broadened to encompass technical, behavioral, emotional, and adaptive dimensions.

Learning Agility

The concept of learning agility was first introduced by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), emphasizing that individuals with high agility are able to leverage experience to confront new challenges. DeRue et al. (2012) expanded this definition by highlighting cognitive flexibility, rapid learning, and the application of new insights.

In the Indonesian context, Wardhani et al. (2022) found that employees with strong learning agility navigate corporate digitalization processes more effectively. They exhibit speed in mastering new technologies, courage in facing uncertainty, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Similarly, Oktoria Serena et al. (2023) emphasized that learning agility builds employee readiness for workplace automation. However, Rahmawati and Sudarsono (2021) criticize organizations that demand agility from employees while failing to provide adequate support through training, mentoring, or a learning-oriented culture. This positions learning agility as an individual burden rather than the outcome of interaction between people and organizational systems.

Research Gap

Although advances have been made, research challenges remain. First, most literature conceptualizes forensic accounting in peacetime and ignores how crises change environments, leading to fraud tactics and organizational responses (Karman et al., 2023). Crises always create new vulnerabilities, which is concerning. Second, while the Fraud Triangle is often used as a reference framework, few studies have examined how forensic instruments or risk evaluations work in crises, despite several authors' suggestions (Mandal & Amilan, 2023). Third, while AI, big data, and blockchain are celebrated, their impact in crisis settings is rarely assessed, leaving practitioners without evidence-based guidelines (Kaur et al., 2022). The fourth group of barriers is practitioners' lack of resources, training, and organizational support Alrawashedh (2023), but their amplification during a crisis has not been examined. Finally, like many other fields of research, education and training are scarce when studying how accountants can better handle fraud-based crisis challenges.

The preliminary works suggest that accounting students also need emotional intelligence and psychological literacy Imjai et al., (2024), but the research is still lacking on the impact of curricula and professional development on professional preparedness for crisis situations. Sixth, research centered on specific sectors is still sparse. Evidence generated within the confines of public institutions Gbegi & Adebiyi (2014) does not apply indiscriminately to private or multinational corporations, where there is greater exposure to fraudulent activities and the governing structures vary. Last, the incorporation within organizational stratagem still lacks clarity. Some research addresses the documentation aspects or the compliance infrastructure (Smith & Smith, 2024), but there is still a lack of adequate structures for the incorporation of forensic accounting into the overarching frameworks of fraud control and crisis intervention.

Organizational Adaptation

Organizational adaptation is the process of adjusting strategies, structures, and cultures to align with environmental dynamics (Christensen et al., 2018). In the disruptive era, adaptation is not merely survival-oriented but also involves innovation and the pursuit of new opportunities. Research in Indonesia underscores the pivotal role of human resources. Fauzi and Hendrawan (2021) found that HR competence is crucial in service sector adaptation, particularly in dealing with regulatory changes and technological transformation. Nurhayati (2022) demonstrated that a strong learning culture accelerates organizational responses to market shifts, while Purwanto (2023) emphasized participatory leadership as a catalyst for adaptation in the education sector. Nevertheless, Setiawan (2023) identified barriers such as internal resistance, rigid bureaucracy, and weak inter-level communication. These findings suggest that adaptation is not merely a strategic issue but also a cultural and human resource readiness challenge.

Linking Competence, Learning Agility, and Adaptation

The relationship between competence, learning agility, and adaptation can be understood through the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991). Competence provides the basic assets for performance effectiveness, while learning agility enables continuous renewal. Together, they form dynamic capabilities that allow organizations to respond swiftly to change (Teece, 2018).

Wahyuni (2023) confirmed through qualitative research that while competence enhances organizational adaptability, learning agility strengthens this effect by providing mental flexibility and preparedness for uncertainty. Thus, learning agility acts as an amplifier of competence.

Critique of Previous Research

Despite growing attention to competence and learning agility, several gaps remain:

1. Partial focus: Many studies address either competence or agility in isolation, with limited integration (Fauzi & Hendrawan, 2021; Nurhayati, 2022).
2. Global vs. local context: Much of the literature is derived from developed economies, whereas Indonesia—with its unique cultural, bureaucratic, and organizational dynamics—remains underexplored.
3. Quantitative bias: Prior research often employs surveys, limiting the depth of understanding of employees' subjective experiences and organizational dynamics (Wardhani et al., 2022).

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative approach, providing contextual and narrative insights into how competence and learning agility jointly contribute to organizational adaptation in the disruptive era.

III. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore experiences, perceptions, and social dynamics in depth regarding the role of competence and learning agility in organizational adaptation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted in two main sectors heavily affected by digital disruption: services (banking, telecommunications) and manufacturing (automotive, food and beverages). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting employees and leaders considered to possess relevant knowledge and experience.

A total of 20 informants participated, consisting of:

1. 5 human resource managers,
2. 5 division supervisors,
3. 10 operational employees.

Data Collection Techniques

1. In-depth interviews (semi-structured) to capture perceptions and lived experiences.
2. Participatory observation to observe organizational dynamics related to training, adaptation, and teamwork.
3. Document analysis (annual reports, HR documents, change-related SOPs) as secondary data.

Data Analysis Techniques

1. Data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, consisting of:

2. Data reduction: selecting and coding significant information.
3. Data display: organizing findings into thematic matrices.
4. Conclusion drawing/verification: identifying patterns, meanings, and inter-variable relationships.

Data Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, the study applied:

1. Triangulation of sources and methods (interviews, observation, documents).
2. Member checking (validating findings with participants).
3. Peer debriefing (discussions with fellow researchers).

IV. Results and Discussion

Employee Competence as the Foundation of Adaptation

Interviews revealed that technical competence (e.g., mastery of ERP software, digital marketing, IoT-based production) remains a basic requirement for organizational transformation. However, most informants emphasized that non-technical competencies—such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving—play a more decisive role in sustaining organizational adaptation. This resonates with Boyatzis (2008), who argued that emotional and social intelligence are critical for organizational performance in complex contexts.

Learning Agility as a Catalyst

Employees with high learning agility were found to adapt more quickly to new systems and procedures. They demonstrated proactiveness in problem-solving, willingness to experiment, and resilience in the face of failure. As one supervisor explained:

“We are often given new systems, but not everyone can adapt quickly. Those with agility usually master it earlier and then teach others.”

This finding aligns with Wardhani et al. (2022), who highlighted the positive correlation between learning agility and organizational readiness for digitalization.

Synergy Between Competence and Learning Agility

The study shows that competence and learning agility are complementary. Competence provides the technical and foundational knowledge, while learning agility accelerates the internalization and application of that competence in changing contexts. Without agility, competence risks becoming rigid and outdated; conversely, without competence, agility leads only to superficial learning without effective implementation.

Organizational Adaptation as a Collective Outcome

Organizational adaptation manifested in several forms:

- a. Digital transformation (adoption of e-learning, ERP systems, digital customer service),
- b. Team restructuring into flatter organizational hierarchies,
- c. Learning culture building driven by leadership initiatives.

Nevertheless, resistance to change persisted, particularly among senior employees reluctant to adopt new technologies. This reflects Setiawan's (2023) observation that organizational adaptation is not only a strategic challenge but also a cultural and mindset issue.

Critical Discussion

Theoretically, the findings reinforce the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), suggesting that competence and learning agility constitute unique resources that generate competitive advantage. They also support Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece, 2018), which emphasizes adaptive capacities as key to thriving under environmental turbulence.

Practically, the study offers three key implications for organizations:

1. Invest not only in technical training but also in developing soft skills.
2. Create ecosystems that foster continuous learning and knowledge sharing.
3. Address employee resistance through open communication and participatory leadership.

V. Conclusion

This study concludes that employee competence serves as the foundation of organizational adaptation in the disruptive era, while learning agility acts as a catalyst that amplifies the impact of competence on successful adaptation. The synergy between the two enables organizations not only to survive disruption but also to transform into more innovative and competitive entities.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study enriches the literature on competence, learning agility, and adaptation through a qualitative lens that highlights contextual dynamics in Indonesia. From a practical perspective, it provides actionable recommendations for human resource management to design integrated development programs that combine technical mastery, soft skill enhancement, and a culture of continuous learning.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that organizations capable of leveraging both competence and learning agility are better positioned to respond to disruption—not just by adapting, but by innovating and leading within their industries.

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