



STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION: ANALYSIS AND IMPLEMENTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SERBIA

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Abstract: This paper explores the potential for the development of learning organizations in the context of the Republic of Serbia, with special emphasis on the sectors of education, public administration and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The aim of the research is to analyze the extent to which the principles of organizational learning are present in the strategic documents of Serbia, and what are the institutional, cultural and economic factors that facilitate or hinder their implementation. Methodologically, the paper relies on a qualitative analysis of the content of relevant national strategies, academic literature and international recommendations in the field of knowledge management. The results show that the education sector has the most developed mechanisms for the adoption of learning principles, while the public administration faces rigid structures that slow down the transformation. The SME sector shows flexibility, but suffers from limited resources and a lack of institutional support. The paper concludes that the development of learning organizations is a key prerequisite for sustainable institutional development and competitiveness of Serbia in the digital era. Recommendations for shaping public policies and strengthening strategic capacities through the systematic introduction of the principles of organizational learning in all sectors are proposed.

Keywords: learning organization, knowledge management, public administration, Serbia, education, strategies

Introduction

In the modern era, which is characterized by high dynamics of change, growing complexity of systems and increasing uncertainty in the global market, the ability of organizations to learn has become essential for their survival and competitiveness. A learning organization is defined as a system that is capable of identifying, creating, interpreting, and transmitting knowledge, as well as changing its own behavior in accordance with newly acquired knowledge (Garvin, Edmondson & Gino, 2008). Although the concept gained its basic contours at the end of the 20th century thanks to the pioneering work of Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*, 1990), in recent years it has been experiencing a new affirmation due to digitalization, pandemic challenges and the accelerated transition to a knowledge-based economy.

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New research suggests that organizations that systematically cultivate learning are more resilient to crisis situations, more flexible in strategic planning, and more effective in innovation processes (Mills et al., 2021; Ahmed & Hussain, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of organizational learning, as many organizations have been forced to rapidly adapt business models, establish new digital communication channels, and redefine human resource management strategies (Loon, Otaye & Stewart, 2021).

In today's developed society, an entity's knowledge base is quickly becoming its only sustainable competitive advantage. As such, this resource must be protected, nurtured, and shared among entity members. Until recently, businesses were able to achieve success based on the individual knowledge of a few strategically positioned individuals. However, when competitors promise more knowledge as part of their services, the competition is over. Why? Because organizational knowledge does not replace the knowledge of the individual, but complements it, making it stronger and wider. Therefore, the full use of the entity's knowledge base, combined with the potential of individuals' skills, competencies, thoughts, innovations and ideas, will enable the company to compete more effectively in the future (Tot, Savić Tot, 2019)

In the context of the Republic of Serbia, the need for the development of learning organizations is particularly evident in the framework of multi-layered reforms that include the education system, public administration, the entrepreneurial sector and digital transformation. Although certain elements of the concept are present in existing strategies, such as the Smart Specialization Strategy (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2023) and the Digital Skills Strategy (2021-2026), an integrated and systematic approach to organizational learning has not yet been developed in a way that would enable its institutional anchoring.

Contemporary authors suggest that a learning organization does not develop spontaneously, but requires the existence of specific structural and cultural prerequisites, including: supportive leadership, an open organizational culture, investment in human capital, the development of digital competencies, and the institutionalization of the learning process (Marquardt & Yeo, 2020; Widayani & Damayanti, 2023). In this sense, the question of how to systematically develop learning organizations in Serbia is becoming crucial not only for economic growth, but also for strengthening democratic capacity, citizen participation and sustainable development.

The aim of this paper is to provide a framework for understanding the opportunities and challenges in the implementation of this concept in the domestic context by analyzing the strategies presented in the document "Strategies for Creating a Learning Organization". The paper will include: a theoretical analysis of the key dimensions of the learning organization, an overview of the latest scientific insights in the field, contextualization of the problem in the specific conditions of Serbia, as well as recommendations for policy and further research. The focus will be on identifying institutional, economic and cultural factors that facilitate or hinder the adoption of organizational learning as a principle of modern management and knowledge management.



Theoretical Framework and Key Strategies for the Development of a Learning Organization

The concept of a learning organization is rooted in multiple disciplines – including organizational theory, educational sciences, systems dynamics, and cognitive psychology. Its modern form is the result of decades of development of ideas about collective learning, adaptive management and knowledge exchange within organizational systems. Although the foundations were laid by the work of Argyris and Schön (1978), today's theoretical and empirical research offers more sophisticated models and strategies that enable effective and sustainable learning at the organizational level.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is the foundation of the concept of a learning organization. It is a methodological approach that enables the understanding of complex interdependencies within organizational processes, as well as the ability to anticipate the consequences of decisions in the long term. Peter Senge points out this discipline as the "fifth skill", which connects all the others and allows for a holistic approach to problem solving (Senge, 1990).

In the contemporary literature, systems thinking is being upgraded through the use of digital tools and scenario modeling, which allows organizations to recognize patterns faster and act proactively (Papachroni, Heracleous & Paroutis, 2021). This approach is particularly important in Serbia's public sector, where sectoral thinking and a lack of coordination between institutions are often present.

Team Learning and Dialogue

Team learning refers to the ability of a group to develop collective intelligence and to achieve a better understanding of problems and solutions through joint reflection, analysis, and critical dialogue. This strategy is especially evident in organizations that face complex tasks that go beyond the individual competencies of members.

The development of facilitation, nonviolent communication, and group reflection skills, as pointed out by Loon et al. (2021), are key elements that enable effective team learning in a digital and hybrid work environment. In the context of Serbia, the challenge is the lack of institutionalized forms of teamwork, as well as the cultural tendency towards a hierarchical structure, which hinders the horizontal exchange of knowledge.

Personal mastery and development of the individual

Learning organizations encourage their members to continuously improve their own competencies, develop self-awareness, and take responsibility for personal and professional development. This strategy involves establishing an environment in which individuals have access to learning resources, mentoring support, and the freedom to experiment.

In recent years, more and more authors have pointed to the importance of integrating emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and digital literacy within personal mastery (Ahmed & Hussain, 2022). In Serbia, this is particularly important given the deficit of continuing adult education and the uneven quality of training in different sectors.



Mental Models and Organizational Culture

Mental models are deep-seated beliefs, assumptions, and paradigms that influence how individuals perceive the world and make decisions. Transforming an organization toward learning requires recognizing and rethinking these models, especially when they are an obstacle to adaptation and innovation.

Contemporary work highlights the importance of a "culture of psychological safety," where employees can voice opinions, make mistakes, and experiment without fear of repercussions (Mills et al., 2021). In Serbia, changes in mental models are met with resistance in organizations with authoritarian management styles, where mistakes are often sanctioned and bottom-up initiatives are suppressed.

A Shared Vision and Leadership

A vision in a learning organization is not just a strategic document, but a living narrative that inspires and guides all members of the organization. A key role is played by a leader who, in addition to setting goals, fosters dialogue, builds trust and encourages the development of a common identity.

Studies in recent years increasingly point to the importance of transformational and participatory leadership in the creation of learning organizations (Widyani & Damayanti, 2023). Leaders in Serbia often operate within the framework of traditional governance models, which limits the scope for developing a vision that goes beyond daily political and short-term goals.

Strategies that lead to the formation of a learning organization require simultaneous action at the individual, team and systemic levels. The theoretical framework shows that organizational learning is not a mere accumulation of knowledge, but a process of transformation through the interaction of people, processes and values. In the context of Serbia, the challenges are not only related to technical capacities but also to cultural patterns, institutional norms and leadership styles. The next chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of concrete opportunities and limitations of the implementation of these strategies in the education system, the public sector and the SME sector in Serbia.

Materials and methods

The aim of this research was to identify and analyze strategies that enable the development of learning organizations in the context of the Republic of Serbia, with a focus on the sectors of education, public administration and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Accordingly, a qualitative research approach was applied, relying on the descriptive-analytical method.

The data were collected through secondary analysis of the content of strategic documents, academic literature and international sources. Key sources include the Smart Specialization Strategy (2023), the Digital Skills Development Strategy (2021–2026), as well as the document "Strategies for Creating a Learning Organization". In addition, scientific papers by domestic and foreign authors in the field of organizational learning, knowledge management and transformational leadership were used.

The analysis was carried out through a thematic framework based on the theoretical models of Peter Senge, Garvin, Marquardt and other contemporary authors. The key elements of a learning



organization were used as analytical guides: systems thinking, team learning, personal mastery, transformation of mental models, shared vision, and supportive leadership.

The units of analysis were the sectors of education, public administration and SMEs, which were viewed through the prism of institutional readiness, organizational culture and resource capacities for the introduction of organizational learning strategies.

Given the nature of the research, the paper did not use an empirical method (survey, interview), but relied on an interpretive interpretation of the content from documents and literature. Thus, the paper is positioned as a theoretical-analytical contribution to the understanding of institutional conditions and challenges in the implementation of the concept of a learning organization in the domestic context.

Results

Analysis from the Perspective of Serbia: Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing the Strategies of a Learning Organization

The application of the concept of a learning organization in the context of the Republic of Serbia raises complex issues related to the readiness of institutions, organizational culture, policy framework and availability of resources for long-term investment in knowledge and learning. Although certain aspects of this concept appear implicitly in various strategic documents and practices, its systematic and integrated application has not yet been institutionalized (Savić Tot,2022). This chapter analyses the potentials and challenges of implementing the strategies of a learning organisation in three key sectors: education, public administration and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The Education Sector: The Foundation of a Learning Organization

Serbia's education system is in the process of transition, conditioned by the need to harmonize with European standards, develop digital skills and adapt to modern market demands. Although reforms have been initiated through documents such as *the Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2030* and *the Digital Agenda*, in practice there is still a predominance of frontal teaching, rigid curricula and poor integration of project-oriented learning and cross-curricular linking.

The implementation of the strategies of the learning organization in education includes:

- Creating collaborative teams of teachers who jointly plan, reflect and innovate teaching methods;
- Introduction of feedback mechanisms between students, teachers and school administrations;
- Developing infrastructure for digital learning and the exchange of teaching practices (e.g. through platforms such as *the eProsveta educational portal*).

Despite these efforts, many authors point out that formal education in Serbia fails to generate reflective and innovative individuals ready to work in learning organizations (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2022). Insufficient cooperation between educational institutions and the economy further reduces the relevance of the acquired knowledge.

Public Administration: Potential for Institutional Learning

Public administration in Serbia is a huge system that includes ministries, agencies, local self-governments and independent bodies. Reforming public administration is one of the key conditions of the EU accession process, with an emphasis on efficiency, transparency and professionalization.



Strategies for an organization that learns in this context could include:

- Establishment of continuous professional development programs through state institutions such as the *National Academy of Public Administration*;
- Creating knowledge networks that connect different sectors and encourage horizontal learning;
- Promoting "organizational memory" – through digital archives, knowledge bases and case study documents.

However, an analysis conducted by the European Commission (2023) indicates that organizational learning in the public administration of Serbia is often reduced to formal training, without reflective reflection on mistakes, without policy evaluation and without participatory decision-making.

A cultural challenge is represented by a hierarchical and bureaucratic decision-making structure, which discourages bottom-up initiative and renders experiments and failures meaningless as learning opportunities (Widyani & Damayanti, 2023).

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs): The Key to an Innovative Economy

SMEs make up more than 99% of business entities in Serbia and are a key pillar of the national economy. However, despite their quantitative representation, most SMEs operate on the basis of traditional business models, without a clear strategy for the development of knowledge and innovation. The reason for this is:

- Limited financial and human resources to invest in education and development;
- Lack of support in establishing a knowledge management system;
- Lack of links with universities and R&D organizations.

The implementation of the principles of the learning organization in the SME sector requires the development of models of accessible knowledge management tools, as well as support through national and European programs that encourage innovative practices (Ahmed & Hussain, 2022). It is also necessary to develop mentoring and advisory infrastructure that would enable SMEs to establish mechanisms for collective learning and adaptation.

The analysis of the sector in Serbia shows that there is a clear potential for the implementation of the concept of a learning organization, but also a number of structural and cultural obstacles that slow down its implementation. The dominant barriers include: lack of systemic vision, limited resources, entrenched hierarchical governance patterns, and insufficient cross-sectoral cooperation. At the same time, the current reform agendas, the process of European integration and the development of digital infrastructure offer a unique opportunity to institutionalize the process of organizational learning. Further research should be directed towards the development of locally adapted models of learning organizations, which will take into account the contextual specifics and real capacities of Serbian society.,



Discussion

Strategic Gap in the Context of Organizations Learning from the Perspective of the Republic of Serbia and the Impact of Artificial Intelligence

A strategic gap in an organization can be defined as the gap between the existing strategy, resources, and competencies and those that are necessary to achieve the goals set in the future (Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2017). In the context of learning organizations, the strategic gap manifests itself as a mismatch between an organization's actual ability to learn, innovate, and adapt and those abilities it should possess in order to successfully cope with market challenges.

In Serbia, research shows that many organizations have not yet developed a culture of continuous organizational learning to a sufficient extent (Đorđević, 2021). Barriers include outdated governance structures, insufficient integration of modern technologies into business processes, as well as limited leadership support in promoting innovation and knowledge (Vukonjanski et al., 2021). In addition, the education system and the system of professional development are often not sufficiently connected to the needs of the labor market, which contributes to the extension of the strategic gap (Radovanovic & Filipović, 2020).

One of the significant causes of the strategic gap in Serbia is the insufficient readiness of organizations to implement the concepts of knowledge management and learning from mistakes (Petrovic, 2019). A formalistic approach to strategic planning often dominates, while mechanisms for evaluating and adapting strategies based on experiential learning are poorly developed (Janićijević, 2019).

The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Closure of a Strategic Gap

Artificial intelligence brings transformative opportunities for organizations striving to become learning organizations, especially in the context of closing the strategic gap. AI technologies enable more efficient data collection, processing, and analysis, thereby improving decision-making processes and opening up space for faster adaptation to changes in the environment (Russell & Norvig, 2021).

In the context of Serbia, the application of artificial intelligence is still in its infancy, but there are positive developments in certain sectors, especially in the field of finance, telecommunications and the IT industry (Mladenović, 2021). However, integrating AI tools into organizational learning requires more than just introducing new technologies – it is necessary to redefine organizational culture, develop employees' digital competencies, and provide strategic support from top management (Vujičić, 2022).

AI can contribute to the closure of a strategic gap through the following aspects:

- **Personalization of employee learning and development:** AI tools allow for the creation of individualized development plans that track employee progress in real time (Bessen, 2023).
- **Predictive analytics for strategic planning:** Organizations that use AI to analyze market trends and anticipate changes in the environment can proactively adjust their strategies (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017).
- **Automation of routine tasks:** Freeing up the capacity of employees for creative and innovative tasks contributes to the development of the organization as a learning system (Russell & Norvig, 2021).



However, it is important to highlight the risks associated with over-reliance on AI, including loss of institutional knowledge, ethical dilemmas, and the risk of technological dependency (Florida & Cows, 2019).

The strategic gap in learning organizations in the Republic of Serbia is a significant challenge in the era of accelerated change and digitalization. Although there are individual examples of good practice, most organizations face difficulties in building a culture of continuous learning and innovation. Artificial intelligence offers significant opportunities to improve organizational learning processes and close the strategic gap, but it requires a systemic approach and changes on multiple levels – from strategies and structures to organizational culture. In my opinion, success in overcoming the strategic gap will depend primarily on the ability of management to combine the potential of new technologies with the development of human resources and the creation of an open and inclusive learning environment. Without such an integrated approach, even the most advanced technologies will not be able to transform organizations into true learning organizations on their own.

In the previous chapters, theoretical frameworks, key strategies and sectoral potentials for the development of a learning organization in the context of the Republic of Serbia were analyzed. This chapter will propose concrete recommendations for improving institutional and organizational capacities, with the aim of systematically embedding learning in organizational practices, policies and culture.

Recommendations for the Development of Learning Organizations in Serbia

Development of a National Strategy for Organizational Learning

Despite the existence of sectoral strategies that implicitly recognize the importance of knowledge and innovation, Serbia still does not have a national framework that explicitly addresses the development of learning organizations. It is recommended to develop an integrated **National Strategy for Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management**, which would include:

- Frameworks for the development of organizational learning in the public and private sectors;
- Measurable success indicators (e.g. number of employees involved in training programmes, number of innovation proposals per employee, degree of knowledge exchange between sectors);
- Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the strategy.

This strategy should be in line with the goals of the *Digital Agenda* and the *Smart Specialization Strategy of Serbia* (2023), but also build on them through a focus on learning processes, not just results.

Introduction of Organizational Learning Indicators in Evaluation Standards

Currently, most public institutions and companies in Serbia measure performance exclusively through quantitative indicators (performance, profit, number of users), while the dimensions of learning and innovation are rarely quantified. It is proposed to introduce organisational learning indicators into quality standards, similar to systems such as ISO 30401 (Knowledge Management) and EFQM (European Model for Business Excellence).

The indicators could cover the following areas:

- The level of formal and informal education of employees;
- The existence of a system for internal mentoring and knowledge exchange;



- The number of initiatives implemented to improve the process based on employee feedback.

The introduction of such standards would allow for a more objective evaluation of an organization's ability to learn and innovate.

Strengthening Leadership for Learning

One of the key prerequisites for the development of a learning organization is the existence of a leader who not only knows the principles of learning, but also actively applies them in management. It is recommended to create **training programs for leadership skills in the context of organizational learning**, which would be implemented by institutions such as:

- National Academy of Public Administration;
- Faculties of Organizational Sciences, Political Science and Management;
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia and Regional Development Agencies.

Trainings would include content in the field of transformational leadership, team facilitation, conflict management, organizational culture, and systems thinking (Loon et al., 2021; Marquardt & Yeo, 2020).

Supporting the SME sector through digital and mentoring infrastructure

For small and medium-sized enterprises, it is recommended to establish **regional knowledge centers** that would offer:

- Mentoring support in creating internal systems for the exchange of knowledge;
- Tools for self-evaluation of the level of organizational learning;
- Digital resources (e-platforms, guides, manuals) adapted to the SME sector;
- Access to mini-grants to test and implement learning strategies.

The model can be developed in cooperation with EU programs (*Erasmus+*, *Horizon Europe*) and with the support of local self-governments.

Connecting the education system and the economy

It is necessary to strategically connect higher education institutions, research centers and the economy through joint programs:

- Dual Education and Student Internships;
- Open Innovation Labs and Campuses (living labs);
- Co-created courses and study programs with business partners.

Such cooperation develops young professionals the ability for teamwork, adaptive thinking and continuous learning – key competencies for participation in learning organizations (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2022).

The proposed recommendations point to the need for a systemic and transversal approach to the development of learning organizations in Serbia. Establishing institutional frameworks, developing leadership, connecting sectors and creating an enabling environment for innovation and knowledge exchange are key points of action. The effects of these measures would not only be reflected in strengthening the competitiveness of individual organizations, but also in improving the overall social capacity for learning, innovation and sustainable development.



Conclusions and directions of future research

The concept of a learning organization is one of the most important theoretical and practical frameworks for the development of organizational resilience, innovation and long-term sustainability in the modern era. Through the analysis of the strategies presented in the document *Strategies for Creating a Learning Organization*, and their interpretation in the light of the Serbian institutional and economic context, this paper has shown that there is a wide range of opportunities, but also significant obstacles to the implementation of the principles of organizational learning in Serbia.

At the normative level, strategies such as systems thinking, team learning, leadership development, transformation of mental models, and institutionalization of dialogue have proven to be universally applicable. However, their successful implementation in Serbia requires profound structural changes in organizational culture, educational policies, public administration system and business practices. The key challenges identified in the paper relate to:

- Lack of an integrated organizational learning strategy;
- The dominance of the hierarchical and authoritarian model of governance;
- Limited capacities in the SME sector and public administration for the institutionalization of knowledge;
- Poor connection between education and practice, resulting in a deficit of competencies to work in learning organizations.

On the other hand, gradual digital transformation, public administration reforms within the European integration process, as well as an increasing number of innovative education initiatives, create the basis for the development of models that would integrate the principles of organizational learning in various spheres of society.

The analysis of strategies for creating a learning organization in the context of the Republic of Serbia has shown that the development of this type of organization is crucial for the long-term competitiveness, resilience and sustainable development of the domestic society and economy. Although there are some positive steps through sectoral strategies and initiatives, such as *the Smart Specialization Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2023)* and *the Digital Skills Development Strategy (2021-2026)*, there is a lack of an integrated and systemic framework that would enable the comprehensive institutionalization of the organizational learning process (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021; 2023). The strategic gap, as the difference between an organization's desired and existing capacity to learn, innovate, and adapt to change, remains deeply pronounced. The biggest obstacles are found in entrenched hierarchical and authoritarian models of governance, fragmentation of institutional structures, limited resources for investing in human capital, and insufficient integration of the education system with the needs of the labor market (Vukonjanski et al., 2021; Radovanović & Filipović, 2020).

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a double-edged sword in this context: on the one hand, it opens up new opportunities to improve organizational learning through personalization of employee development, predictive analytics, and automation of routine tasks (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Russell & Norvig, 2021); on the other hand, its successful integration requires radical changes in organizational culture,



leadership practices, and the development of digital competencies, without which AI remains an underutilized potential (Vujičić, 2022; Mladenović, 2021). In this sense, the transformation of organizations into true learning organizations cannot be based solely on technological innovation, but must involve profound cultural, structural and institutional changes

Serbia is at a crossroads between the legacy of traditional governance models and the potential of modern, innovation-driven development. In this sense, building learning organizations should not be treated as a technical innovation or another reform, but as a profound cultural change that entails redefining the way we think, collaborate, and learn.

Based on the findings of the paper, the following priority directions for future empirical and theoretical research can be identified:

- **The influence of national culture on the adoption of the principles of a learning organization.** Comparative studies are needed to compare the Serbian context with countries with similar historical and political pasts in order to better understand cultural barriers and potentials for the development of organizational learning (Widyani & Damayanti, 2023).
- **Development and validation of organizational learning indicators in the public sector.** Empirical research is needed to identify measurable indicators of successful organizational learning in public administration, education and health institutions in Serbia (European Commission, 2023).
- **The Application and Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Organizational Learning.** Research should focus on developing locally adapted models for the use of AI in the function of learning – through digital knowledge-sharing platforms, automated evaluation, and personalized professional development programs (Russell & Norvig, 2021; Bessen, 2023).
- **Leadership Models for Learning Organizations in Serbia.** Empirical research should examine the effectiveness of different leadership styles, with a particular focus on transformational and participatory leadership, in promoting a culture of learning in the public and private sectors (Marquardt & Yeo, 2020).
- **Developing a knowledge ecosystem linking education, economy and research centres.** Multidisciplinary research is needed to offer models for establishing sustainable networks of knowledge and innovation, relying on European integration and the digital agenda (Bjekić & Zlatić, 2022).

The realization of these research directions could contribute to the design of locally relevant solutions and policies that would accelerate Serbia's transformation towards a knowledge-based and learning-based society. In this regard, future research must have a transdisciplinary character and focus on the integration of theory and practice in the domain of organizational learning.

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