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SUBJECT AREA: STRATEGY AND ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Retail Executives' Professional Learning Contents

Conteúdos de aprendizagem profissional de executivos varejistas

Contenidos de aprendizaje profesional de ejecutivos del sector minorista

Eduardo de Aquino Lucena¹
Cristiano José Castro de Almeida Cunha²

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ABSTRACT

The research question that is addressed in this article is the following: what do the executives from small retailing firms learn in their work environment? The theoretical framework of the study is based on texts from the field of learning. This is a qualitative investigation. Ten interviews with clothing retail executives were carried out. Later, these interviews were transcribed and analyzed. In the data analysis stage, two categories were established in response to the research question. Regarding the first, respondents perceived difficulties (problems) in their work environments and obtained specific information and knowledge in order to deal with these situations. So as to overcome different professional difficulties, respondents learned about colors and types of fabric and about certain manufacturing process aspects referring to the clothing sold by their companies. They also declared to have

learned about their companies' suppliers and about certain issues referring to sales, and to the accounting and the financial management of their companies. The second category refers to a change in some of the respondents' habits. This learning content refers to predispositions to respond and/or act in situations at their work environments. Respondents reported having changed the way they related to other people. They emphasized that they had learned how to interact with the employees at their stores and how to carry out supervision. Differently from other studies, we found that the retailers' learning (individual learning) affected their companies' learning (organizational learning) through changes in certain aspects of the analyzed companies' organizational structures.

Keywords: Managers' learning. Organizational learning. Learning contents. Retail executives.

1. Doctor in Production Engineering by the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) Professor at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE) [eaqlucena@yahoo.com.br]
2. Doctor in Business Administration by the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule Aachen, Germany Professor at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) [01cunha@gmail.com]
Authors' address: Campus Universitário Reitor João David Ferreira Lima
Trindade – Florianópolis – Santa Catarina – CEP: 88040-900 – Brazil

RESUMO

A questão de pesquisa que é abordada neste artigo é a seguinte: o que executivos de pequenas empresas varejistas aprendem em seus ambientes de trabalho? O arcabouço teórico do estudo toma como base textos do campo da aprendizagem. Esta é uma investigação qualitativa. Foram realizadas dez entrevistas com executivos do setor de varejo de vestuário. Posteriormente, essas entrevistas foram transcritas e analisadas. Na etapa de análise de dados, foram construídas duas categorias como respostas à questão de pesquisa. No tocante à primeira, os respondentes perceberam dificuldades (problemas) em seus ambientes de trabalho e obtiveram informações e conhecimentos específicos de modo a lidarem com essas situações. A fim de superarem diferentes dificuldades profissionais os respondentes aprenderam sobre cores e tipos de tecido e sobre o processo de fabricação dos artigos de vestuário que eram comercializados por suas firmas. Eles também declararam ter aprendido sobre os fornecedores de suas firmas e sobre algumas questões relacionadas com as vendas, a contabilidade e a administração financeira de suas empresas. A segunda categoria refere-se à alteração de alguns dos hábitos dos respondentes. Esse conteúdo de aprendizagem refere-se às predisposições para responderem e/ou atuarem em situações de seus ambientes de trabalho. Os entrevistados mencionaram ter modificado o modo como se relacionavam com outras pessoas. Eles enfatizaram ter aprendido sobre as maneiras de interação com as funcionárias de suas lojas e como exerciam a tarefa de supervisão. Divergindo de outros estudos, constatou-se que a aprendizagem dos varejistas (aprendizagem individual) afetou a aprendizagem de suas firmas (aprendizagem organizacional) por meio de mudanças em alguns aspectos da estrutura organizacional das firmas estudadas.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem de gerentes. Aprendizagem organizacional. Conteúdos de aprendizagem. Executivos varejistas.

RESUMEN

El tema de investigación que se aborda en este artículo es el siguiente: ¿qué aprenden los ejecutivos de pequeñas empresas minoristas en sus lugares de trabajo? El marco teórico de este estudio se basa en textos del ámbito del aprendizaje. Esta investigación es cualitativa. Se llevaron a cabo diez entrevistas con ejecutivos de la industria de ropa al por menor. Posteriormente, estas entrevistas fueron transcritas y analizadas. En la etapa del análisis de datos, se crearon dos categorías en respuesta a la pregunta de investigación. Respecto a la primera, los encuestados encuentran dificultades (problemas) en sus ambientes de trabajo y para obtener información y conocimientos con el fin de hacer frente a estas situaciones. Con el fin de superar las diferentes dificultades, los profesionales encuestados aprendieron sobre los colores y los tipos de tela, y el proceso de fabricación de prendas de vestir que se vendían en sus empresas. También afirmaron haber aprendido sobre los proveedores de sus firmas y sobre algunas cuestiones relacionadas con las ventas, la contabilidad y la gestión financiera de sus empresas. La segunda categoría se refiere a la modificación de algunos de los hábitos de los encuestados. Este contenido de aprendizaje se refiere a las predisposiciones para responder y/o actuar en situaciones de sus entornos de trabajo. Los encuestados informaron haber cambiado la forma en que trataban a otras personas. Hicieron hincapié en que habían aprendido sobre las formas de interacción con los empleados de sus tiendas y la forma en que se ejercía la tarea de la supervisión. A diferencia de otros estudios, se encontró que el aprendizaje de los minoristas (aprendizaje individual) afecta al aprendizaje de sus empresas (aprendizaje organizativo) a través de cambios en algunos aspectos de la estructura organizativa de las empresas estudiadas.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje de gerentes. Aprendizaje organizativo. Aprendizaje de contenidos. Ejecutivos del sector minorista.

I INTRODUCTION

Administration literature reveals that modern companies' success is increasingly dependent on their learning capabilities. Organizations cannot maintain themselves in practices established for long periods, but need to create new processes. The Organizational Learning field includes different standpoints concerning the purposes, the essence, the research methodologies employed and the effectiveness of interventions in organizations. A substantial number of academics and consultants provide a broad debate on these issues.

When commenting on the increase in research concerning Organizational Learning, Easterby-Smith, Crossan and Nicolini (2000) reveal that, although there has been interest about learning in organizations since the late 1950s, the biggest increase in studies concerning this field occurred from the late 1980s on. Fenwick (2008), after carrying out a review of literature on learning at work in nine prestigious journals in English, adds that empirical studies are contributing important details to enrich the field.

In the Organizational Learning field, different studies have contributed to a better understanding of the different aspects of the managers' learning phenomenon. We can mention, for example, the proposal of Elkjaer (2004, 2013), who, drawing on the work of the U.S. philosopher John Dewe, conceived organizational learning with a tendency towards pragmatism. Antonacopoulou (2006), when carrying out a survey of managers in the banking sector, deepened the understanding of the relationship between individual and organizational learning. Casey and Goldman (2010) created a model for the development of people's strategic thinking ability.

Recently, certain qualitative empirical studies on managers' learning were carried out in Brazil. Silva (2008) developed a theoretical essay so as to analyze the influence of social context on managers' learning. Silva and Silva (2011) studied 16 non-governmental organizations' managers to identify the role of reflection as a

mediator of management learning. Leite (2011) carried out semi-structured interviews with seven general managers from retail banking agencies so as to understand how, through their experiences, they learn managerial functions. D'Amelio (2011) surveyed 15 managers from an urban infrastructure services company, to describe the managerial skills learning processes of people with various professional backgrounds. Reis (2011) used the method to investigate the role of reflection in the learning processes of seven managers who had taken *strictu* or *lato sensu* postgraduate courses.

The phenomenon of managers' learning includes a number of factors such as the process, the context (environment), the technologies and the contents learned. When reviewing literature on Organizational Learning, we observe that there is a gap concerning the detailed knowledge about what managers effectively learn in their work environments. So as to contribute to strengthening the knowledge base in this aspect, the question that guides this study is this: what do executives from small retailers learn at their workplaces?

The empirical segment of the study was carried out with owner-managers of independent companies (not franchises) and small companies from the clothing retail sector in the city of Florianópolis. The companies that make up the retail clothing sector contribute to the local economy, offering a significant number of jobs, and offer the textile industrial complex's final products. Despite the importance of the subject, there is currently little written material about Brazilian retail managers' learning.

This article may contribute to the strengthening of knowledge and follows suggestions made by others in various studies. Didier and Lucena (2008) suggest empirical studies on managers' learning. Mintzberg (2010, p. 16) states that "nowadays we find very few systematic studies of management... overall there is little content on the managers' activities." Cope (2005) believes that there is a need for more research concerning the extent of the learning contents of entrepreneurs so as to deepen the

knowledge on topics such as learning about the person himself, about the business and about the management of small businesses. Fenwick (2008) points out the need to examine in a more refined way the micro relationships between the elements of the learning processes in the individual and collective dimensions.

This knowledge will be useful so that professionals working in this economic segment may start to have an enhanced vision of how, in the workplace, retail managers' learning actually happens. Managers of small Brazilian companies may obtain guidance on various issues pertaining to their professional development by reading this document. Since we highlight the description of participants' perspectives, we believe that the study will help reduce the divide between the school of the representatives of Management Science and that of professionals in the business (SCHÖN, 1983). Furthermore, the study may support reflections by teachers from the business field and by professionals involved in developing small business executives concerning the adequacy of approaches and techniques used in their day to day work.

Including managers from various segments of modern economy, the need for learning also seems to encompass retail managers. The retail sector, which has high labor intensity, presents certain functions that require several years of training before they can be effectively dominated by the manager. Every day, he needs to communicate with a wide variety of people (ANGELO, 1997) and attract, with his company's products and services, a reasonable amount of consumers. Throughout his career, seeking to enable the success of his company, the retail administrator changes his working practices and assimilates new knowledge and skills.

Currently, many managers of small businesses from the retail sector count on the support of only a few professionals when carrying out their companies' administrative activities. Thus, in their everyday activities, they carry out operational and strategic tasks referring to various different management areas. In general, retail managers need to pay attention to different

aspects of their stores, such as layout, hygiene and cleanliness, lighting, HVAC, presentation and prices of the goods, showcases, consumer visualization and internal and external signs. Often, those responsible for the company's top management are taken up by the task of dealing with operational problems.

In this section, we presented the question that guides this study. In the following section, we will discuss the theoretical foundations of this study. In the third section, we will describe the methodological procedures that were used and, in the fourth section, we will present the results achieved in the investigation. In the fifth section, we will promote discussion concerning the results that were reached and the theoretical framework that was used. Finally, in the sixth section, the article's final considerations will be made.

2 MANAGERS' LEARNING

Since the 1930s, various authors have carried out studies to understand aspects of managers' work. In this tradition of studies, we may highlight, among others, the contributions of Chester Barnard, Henry Mintzberg, Rosemary Stewart and John Kotter. More recently, Hales (2005), Tengblad (2002, 2006, 2012) and Mintzberg (2010), among others, have given continuity to discussions in this tradition of studies.

In his classic book, Barnard (1979, p. 213-214) points out that "Not all work carried out by the people who occupy executive positions is connected to executive functions." In certain situations, such as when the president (CEO) of a company personally carries out the sale of products and/or services to specific customers, executives engage in non-executive activities at their companies. To Barnard (1979, p. 219), executives have "relatively general skills involving general monitoring, understanding interest, flexibility, adjustment skills, prudence, courage etc.; and specific abilities based on particular skills or acquired techniques." According to the author, the first type of skill (relatively general) is more

difficult to be developed, but the second type can be developed by training and education.

Mintzberg (2010, p. 61) proposes a model for understanding the work carried out by managers, in which “management occurs at three levels, from the conceptual to the concrete: that of information, that of people and directly to action.” According to the author, two roles carried out by the manager personally refer to (i) structuring (modeling) work, focusing on work issues concerning his specific activities, and (ii) work scheduling, setting an agenda that allocates the time of the manager himself and of the people with whom he interacts on the job.

In 2009, Knud Illeris, renowned author from the learning field, edited the book *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists - In Their Own Words*, published in Portuguese in 2013 to “present an international selection of the most important contemporary authors on learning in a single volume,” and, in his own words, to “offer a general impression of the continuous development and debate in this area” (ILLERIS, 2013, p. 7).

Danish professor Bente Elkjaer, author of one of the chapters of the mentioned book, has carried out his research based on certain concepts and ideas by the renowned American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859-1952). To Elkjaer (2004, p. 424), in the learning process “research concerning the uncertain situation is the prerequisite for acquiring knowledge. Some may also say that the condition for learning is engaging in research and applying thought and reflection as tools in this effort.” The author suggests that understanding the studies of John Dewey concerning notions of experience and reflective thinking may be important to clarify and expand understanding of the learning phenomenon.

To Dewey, the analysis of human behavior should actually take into account the existence of the context to which the individual belongs. Experience is the starting point for the learning process. The philosophy of education proposed by Dewey (2010), opposing traditional thinking, does not see learning as the acquisition of what is already incorporated in books and in the minds

of elders, but as a process in which a person learns through experience. To the author, it is important to discover the connection between past achievements and present problems. The question, to Dewey, is to know how familiarity with the past can be translated into a potential instrumentality for dealing effectively with the future. The concept of habit is highlighted in the author's work:

The principle of habit becomes broader than the common conception of a habit as a more or less fixed way of doing things... The broad conception of habit involves the formation of emotional and intellectual attitudes; it involves our basic sensitivities and our ways of answering all the conditions which we encounter in life (DEWEY, 2010, p. 35).

In his book *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey (1956, p. 24) states that habits such as honesty, courage and recklessness “are not possessions of anyone in particular, but adaptations of personal capacities to the environment.” According to the author, habits can be modified by changes in the person himself or in the environment in which this person finds himself.

The research of Melo and Lucena (2007) described the learning contents of ten managers from the Brazilian bank Caixa Econômica Federal in the Metropolitan Region of the city of Recife. The authors found that these professionals developed skills related to carrying out operational tasks, to communication with people and to personal conduct. Regarding operational tasks, managers learned, among other things, about calculations for housing loans and about interpretations of legal processes. With regard to interpersonal communication, managers learned about trading with customers, customer service and people management.

We considered that the above discussion in this section provides the basis for a better understanding of the contents of the professional learning of the subjects investigated in this study. Next, we will describe the methodological procedures used in the research this article is about.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Based on a subjectivist view of reality, the proposed research follows the guidelines of qualitative research. Researchers conducting qualitative studies are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences. They seek to understand the phenomenon of interest from the perspectives of respondents (MERRIAM, 2009). These researchers are flexible and employ humanistic methods of inquiry.

Typically, qualitative data are presented in the form of words and not numbers. Furthermore, qualitative studies' reports often include quotes by participants (BOGDAN; BIKLEN, 2007). It is noteworthy that investigations that follow this guideline have an emerging project and intentional samples (LINCOLN, GUBA, 1985). In this approach, the researcher is the main instrument in data collection and data analysis. Commonly, a qualitative study is very descriptive and is carried out because existing theories are not sufficient to adequately explain the said phenomenon. The objective of such a study is not to test theories. Thus, there are no hypotheses to be deduced from theory (MERRIAM 1998).

We decided to use an intentional sample in this study. This section presents the criteria used in selecting the sample of this research and their reasons. First, so as to establish boundaries in the sample, we selected only managers from micro and small companies operating in the clothing retail segment and which had, over the period of data collection at least one store in one of two major shopping centers in Florianópolis. Thus, we sought participants who carried out, in their daily lives, work practices that presented certain similarities. The second criterion was that each informant needed to be the owner of the company in which he worked and to have participated in the formulation and implementation of strategies in his organization. Moreover, to ensure that respondents had experienced a wide range of experiences referring to the management of a small retail business, we decided that they should have at least three years' experience in their company's executive functions.

Finally, we selected outstanding companies in the retail clothing market in Florianópolis and that were independent, that is, they could not be franchises of other companies. In this way, we ensured that the respondents were the people responsible for making major decisions in successful organizations among the companies offering clothing in that city.

The subjects in the sample of this study are, therefore, managers-owners of companies in the clothing retail sector in Florianópolis. The organizations directed by the respondents are small and have stores only in the state of Santa Catarina. Besides being owners, all research respondents carried out activities referring to the role of managers in their organizations. That is, they participated directly in making strategic decisions in their companies, such as the opening and closing of shops and the substantial changes in the number of items sold by these stores, carrying out a wide range of daily tasks that considerably involved them in their professional activities. We would like to state that, in order to preserve the confidentiality of these informants, we used pseudonyms to identify the participants, their organizations and the malls where their business institutional were located.

In Chart 1, which presents data about the companies participating in this study, we can be observed that, among the ten organizations surveyed, five traded garments for the adult female segment; two, for the adult male clothing segment; two, fitness articles and beachwear; and one catering for children's and baby's clothing. As well as selling clothing, five of these organizations were engaged in manufacturing. The smallest of the investigated organizations was *Brilhante*, a company with six employees and two stores; the largest was *Aqua*, company with seventy (70) organizational members and which operated five stores. Each of the selected organizations had at least one store in one of the two major malls in Florianópolis suburbs.

Name of participant	Name of organization	Clothing segment marketed	Number of employees	Age (in years)	Number of stores	Does it manufacture a volume of clothing larger than 5% of the volume of marketed clothing?
Inez	Nuvem	Babies== and kids	20	18	2	No
Beatriz	Brilhante	Adult female	6	14	2	No
Leonardo	Krayffo	Adult female and beachwear	25	14	5	No
Daniela	Dama	Adult female	15	12	4	Yes
Alex	Aqua	Beachwear and gym	70	23	5	Yes
Vinicius	Belavista	Adult male	10	11	2	No
Vitório	Baratão	Adult male	27	36	2	Yes
Ablid	Pitropa	Adult female	12	27	2	Yes
Laura	Livre	Adult female	10	6	1	No
Rafaela	X	Beachwear, gym, and smart casual	22	14	3	Yes

CHART 1 – Data concerning participants' organizations

Source: the authors.

The main form of data collection for this study were interviews. The study's ten interviews were carried out in previously scheduled meetings with the participants. Lasting between 50 and 90 minutes, each interview was recorded on cassette tapes and transcribed in less than five days. After each interview, so as to enrich the study's data collection, particularities that were observed in the behavior of managers and in the physical environment of their workplaces were registered. It is noteworthy that, due to informants' preferences, most of the interviews took place in the offices in which they worked. Please note also that the researchers needed to make a number of phone calls before scheduling interviews with certain respondents.

In the data analysis stage, following the transcription of the ten interviews, the authors sought to consolidate, reduce and interpret the data collected. According to Merriam (2009), the data analysis process began with the identification of segments within the collected data. So, after reading the first transcribed interview, we started to make comments in the margins of the text concerning aspects that appeared to be relevant to the study. Once they had completed this activity in the first transcription, the researchers grouped the similar comments and made up an initial list of topics referring to the investigation. These

topics were the first list of research categories, later refined with the data and the observations from the other nine interviews. We assume here the concept of categories presented by Merriam (2009, p. 181), "categories are conceptual elements that 'cover' or span many individual examples... of the category."

Then, taking into account the initial list of topics related to the first text, we dealt in the same manner with the second transcribed interview, that is, we made up a second list of comments. Having completed this task, the two lists were compared and merged into a single list that served as a guide of concepts (or provisional categories), representing the regularities (or patterns) in the data set collected in the study. Then we proceeded with the data analysis process, making comments on the margins of each transcript, grouping them into lists and comparing them with the concepts guide, that emerged from the regularities observed in most of the data collected in the analyzed transcripts. At the end of this activity, we put together a set of categories referring to the objectives of the study and present in all of the transcripts. Then we identified and separated, in different folders, excerpts from transcripts that related to each category found.

These categories met the criteria suggested by Merriam (1998) – that is, they reflect the

purpose of the study, because they group together all the data considered relevant and are mutually exclusive and characterized by the same level of abstraction.

According to Merriam's (2009) guidance, the following section will describe the examined managers' learning contents, through snippets of quotes from the interviews. Please note that this way of presenting study results takes into account one of the suggestions made by Gephart (2004), an author invited by the editor of the *American Management Journal* at the time, to carry out qualitative studies. Gephart (2004, p. 460) states that in these studies "it is important when possible to include primary or raw qualitative data in articles (for example, statements made by the respondents)."

4 RESULTS

In the data analysis phase of the study, two categories were found in response to the research question. The first concerns the information and expertise learned by retailers; the second refers to the changes in some of the habits of the respondents. Retailers learned the learning contents in order to deal adequately with the different aspects of their activities.

4.1 Specific information and knowledge

When carrying out their duties as retail managers, participants assimilated information and knowledge obtained through their networks of relationships (in some cases with a consultant), through events (fashion shows and fairs) and training and educational programs. This learning content contributed to managers being able to not only perceive difficulties (problems) in their workplaces, but also to find solutions to them. Retailers indicated that they learned, among other things, about the colors, the fabric types and the aspects of the manufacturing process of the garments which they sold. Moreover, in the events mentioned, retailers also obtained knowledge about suppliers and about the fields

of sales, accounting and financial management in their companies. This information and specific knowledge assimilated by the respondents proved to be useful for the satisfactory carrying out of their work activities.

Several retailers shared some knowledge obtained about the products with which they worked. At different times in their careers, they came to know factors such as color trends, characteristics of new fabrics and of articles of clothing available in the market. As we mentioned above, the retailers assimilated much of this information in events from the field, such as fashion shows and fairs.

Some learning referring to manufacturing of clothing was mentioned by Ablid and Rafaela. Whilst involved in producing clothes, Ablid discovered that it was important to know what were the proper techniques for cutting and storage of the fabrics used. In order to obtain information about manufacturing clothes from other manufacturers, Rafaela declared: "I am going to learn how she cuts, how she takes advantage of fabrics, how her waste dropped from 30% to 5%."

Several respondents mentioned that they were looking to meet new government legislation, which now required the mechanical recording of all tax receipts issued by retailers. Demonstrating that he was committed to this change, Vinicius said: "we are pursuing this new technology to meet the rigors of the law." On this same subject, Leonardo said that "tax laws are changing. Our companies are being forced to deploy SF, SF is a tax coupon printer. All sales will now have to be mechanically recorded. Formerly, we did this by hand, on a notepad." Thus, we note that changes in tax laws were forcing the respondents to change some of the work routines in their companies. Respondents needed to obtain specific information and knowledge in order to contribute to the adjustments in routines and processes in their companies.

The importance of using certain accounting and financial management tools was mentioned by some respondents. In order to identify which were the products that provided profit for her

company, Inez said her manager role required her to know how to analyze a balance sheet and other financial statements. Daniela said she was improving her company's balance reports. Laura mentioned that, with the support of a consultant, she had started to understand more about "cash flow, projection of results, profit, interest etc." In another part of her interview, she added that she had learned to make performance and goods reports for her store.

In another part of her interview, Rafaela reported that she was seeking information about the labor market of the retail sector in order to properly establish the salaries of employees at her company. Looking to catch up with the work routines of the different company departments, Rafaela commented that she was seeking to find out about the daily tasks of each employee under her supervision.

With regard to labor laws for commercial companies, Alex pointed out that, as president of the shopkeepers association of Floriano Shopping, he needed to obtain a lot of information in order to assist other shopkeepers of the mall on the subject. The retailer needed to know aspects of legislation to assist managers of the stores, which had begun operating on Sundays.

Vinicius and Vitório commented that, over time, they had obtained specific knowledge and information about purchasing goods for their stores. With the guidance of his father, Vinicius had come to realize the importance of knowing not only the suitable places for making purchases, but also to know the prices and delivery dates offered by different suppliers. Vitório explained that, with more experience in retail, he had noticed that certain salesmen from companies supplying their stores received higher commissions on trading certain products. In this way, he had understood why salesmen prioritized sales of certain products and not of others. Subsequently, he added that he had obtained some specific knowledge on textiles, marketing and propaganda.

Some informants commented that they had assimilated specific knowledge about sales. Commenting on a management course, Laura declared: "I learned things that specifically belong

to retail: how to assess a sale. For example, what an additional sale is, what is an aftermarket job, what is a pre-sale, what is a sale closing."

Finally, Alex mentioned that, by interacting with managers from other companies, he had acquired some specific information that was important to his job. Based on these interactions, the respondent discovered, for example, that his store paid an unnecessary lighting fee, and found out the ways in which certain Floriano shopping center stores negotiated working hours on Sundays with their employees. In another part of his interview, Alex commented that, in the last year of his undergraduate degree only, he realized that the central problem of his shop involved strategic planning.

4.2 Habit change

When carrying out their duties as retail managers, participants created certain habits to cope with their work activities. This learning content refers to predispositions to respond and/or act in situations in their environments. This learning content was made possible not only in formal learning environments, that is, in programs involving instruction. Respondents reported having changed the way they related to other people, with particular attention to the learning referring to the ways in which they related to their store employees and to how they carried out oversight of tasks performed by them. Moreover, they reported having changed the way they made decisions, being more cautious in certain situations and more agile in others.

Talking about social relationships, Inez declared: "The thing I learned most, the thing that stores taught me most, was how to deal with people, especially with the people working with us." In this sense too, Beatriz claimed to have changed the way she interacted socially: "I think this was one of the things I really learned most: how to be some kind of a public relations professional [...]; you have to learn how to smile, how to talk and how make the first quick question."

In his interview, Ablid declared: "when I was 18, I was very angry, I was an aggressive person

[...]; I began to reduce my aggressiveness and began to understand people better.” Inez, commenting on learning she had experienced, said:

When relating to people, I've always been a very intransigent person and I had to change a lot to be able to work in the organization. I mean, quite a lot, because in life we come to the conclusion that we are not the absolute truth [...]; when we're younger, we are more intransigent, we think everything we do is right, is the best. With maturity, we see that things are not quite like that [...]; we shape ourselves.

The informant Beatriz claimed to have learned how to set boundaries in her relationships with other professionals from the retail sector. Explaining that she could not share certain strategic information with other shopkeepers, the interviewee stated: “in commerce, I learned that you cannot trust anyone, you cannot just trust the neighboring shop employee, who you thought was your friend.” Alex commented that, talking with workers, he had acquired certain charisma for relationships with other people. Rafaela says she was trying to improve the way she led and understood each of the employees at her company. Moreover, the manager stated that she had begun, over time, to treat her company's employees as a team, respecting them more.

As to the objectives of their stores, retailers said they had learned about the establishment of goals for the stores they managed, about appropriate supervision of employees and the best frequency for holding work meetings. Laura and Rafaela mentioned that, over time, they had changed the way they participated in meetings with employees in their company and the way they oversaw the performance of these employees.

In her interview, Inez revealed that she had acquired a predisposition to delegate certain responsibilities to the employees of her stores by saying: “I do not have the keys to any store. I learned a lot how to delegate, you know, how to teach and to demand results. I demand in a firm way, but I let the person free to do. What she has to do.” In another part of her interview, the

manager gave the example that, in her company, the person responsible for carrying out an eventual change of furniture would not be her, the manager-owner, but the manager.

Worrying about the relationships she established with the saleswomen at her store, Laura said: “I'm more concerned about demanding performance [from the saleswomen]. Nowadays, I already have this attitude. Previously, I didn't. I had to be a friend before being the boss. Now, I really am the boss.” In this way, Laura explained that, even having a cordial relationship with the employees at her company, over time, she had formed the opinion that it was necessary to supervise their work and direct their attention to achieving the goals of her organization.

All the interviewees spoke about the different stages of their careers. Beatriz explained that, when she began to work as a businesswoman, she was a saleswoman at her store. Over time, the interviewee saw the need to hire an extra person to help her. Working alongside another salesperson, Beatriz noticed that, from that moment on, she was managing her company. In this new role, the retailer said that she had learned to give orders to her store employees and, thus, to use a more professional conduct facing them. The retailer explained to the employees that she was the owner of the store and that there was a hierarchy in the company that needed to be respected. At one point in her career, Beatriz realized the need to change certain attitudes and her own behavior facing the employees of her company. She had to learn to supervise: “I had to do something I had never done: to give orders [...]; then, I started having managers, one in each shop. Then I started to realize that I had to speak to the manager and not to the saleswomen.”

Highlighting the importance of standards and discipline in managing her store, Laura pointed out: “I realized that, if I went on being complacent, the company would have no standards and discipline and, consequently, would not have any command [...]; I saw that this is the success of the businessman. I have to demand results, I have to impose a discipline and I have to demand it is fulfilled so that progress is constant.”

Several respondents mentioned that, over time, they had become more cautious when making decisions. Regarding this, Vitório said: “nowadays I am very cautious [...]. Previously I wasn't, I was very immediate-minded, I thought and immediately acted upon it.” Leonardo said he was being much more cautious with regard to making bank loans for business.

On the other hand, some participants mentioned that clothing retail required speed and agility in handling work situations. In addition, managers needed to be updated about new trends. In her interview, Inez pointed out that, as a retailer, she needed to adapt to the changes promoted by the government: “In commerce we have to be very skilled, we are always working according to what the government establishes.” Learning related to the rapid implementation of certain decisions made was also mentioned by Rafaela.

Finally, commenting how she had gained, along her career as a businesswoman, an entrepreneurial vision of business, Beatriz

declared: “I began in this way to [...] have an entrepreneurial vision [...]; I see, well, that you can set up a business for anything. When I took my Administration course, I left there thinking of working for someone [...]; I never left with a business or entrepreneurial vision. I left with the idea of working for someone.” In this way, we can interpret that, having acquired an entrepreneurial profile, the retailer significantly changed skills and career goals.

5 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

As we mentioned before, the study participants assimilated specific information and knowledge, thus finding solutions to the problems and difficulties in managing their companies. Also, they changed some of their habits in order to behave more appropriately in their daily work. Chart 2 summarizes the two categories that were described in the results section.

Specific information and knowledge	Habit change
Respondents perceived difficulties (problems) in their workplaces and obtained specific information and knowledge in order to deal with these situations. After obtaining specific information and knowledge, they were able to overcome the difficulty of their companies in meeting new legislation, that then require mechanical recording of sales. They learned about the colors, the fabric types and the aspects of the manufacturing process of the garments they sold. Retailers reported having learned about suppliers and the management of the sales, accounting and departments of their companies.	Retailers had to change some of their habits in order to deal more adequately with the situations of their respective work environments. The informant Ablid stated that she needed to change the aggressive way she treated others and Inez became less intransigent. Beatriz declared that she had developed a favorable predisposition to entrepreneurial activity and not to searching for a job in some company as she aspired to do early in her career. Respondents perceived the need to change the way they coordinated the activities of employees at their stores, giving more attention to establishing standards and to supervision.

CHART 2 – Retail managers' learning contents

Source: The authors.

The fact that retailers interviewed in this research had learned some specific knowledge about the products marketed by their companies (color trends and characteristics of new fabrics and garments offered in the market), sales techniques, accounting and financial management tools, as indicated in the results section and Chart 2, reinforces the idea of Barnard (1979). That is, often executives do not perform only the executive functions of the company but also engage in other

activities, and learning about them can be vital to their business success.

The information obtained by the retailers was important for the establishment of activities that would make up their work schedules. On this point, based on research results, Mintzberg (2010, p. 63) makes the following statement: “Everything that goes into the agenda is interpreted as a sign of what is important within the unit. In fact, when managers program, they are almost always

allocating not only their own time but also the time of those who report to them.” As shown in Chart 2, several researched retailers indicated involvement with the task of meeting government regulations that required mechanical records of all tax receipts issued by their stores. They needed to act in order to obtain specific information and knowledge to perform this task so that their companies might meet the new government regulations. The result that retailers assimilated specific information reinforces the thoughts of Mintzberg (1973, 2010) in the sense that managers perform the role of monitors, that is, “run after any useful information they can find, whether on internal operations or external events, trends...” (MINTZBERG, 2010, p. 65).

We can observe in the results section that the difficulties (problems) faced by retailers emerged when they lived out their work experiences. Respondents needed specific information and knowledge in order to, for example, make decisions about the products sold by their stores, meet new government regulations requiring mechanically recorded tax receipts, establish appropriate salaries for employees in their companies and purchase goods for their stores. Note that respondents obtained specific information and knowledge in order to become able to establish not only the problems to be faced but also the solutions to work situations. This result reinforces the thoughts of Elkjaer (2004, 2013) in the sense that people carry out an investigation (inquiry) in order to obtain the knowledge necessary for the effective solution of the problem encountered.

Another important result of the study, highlighted in Chart 2, was that respondents had to change some of their habits in order to deal more satisfactorily with work situations. As seen in the results section, retailers have changed the ways they deal with other people. The respondent Ablid mentioned that she became less aggressive with others and Inez said that she had to change her behavior, becoming less intransigent. Beatriz established limits in her relationships with other retailers, no longer sharing business information. It is clear, therefore, that participants changed

some of their habits concerning relationships with other professionals (inside and outside of the organizations studied). They changed their predispositions – a term highlighted by Dewey (1956) in his conception about what is a habit – to deal with other people.

In carrying out their duties, respondents perceived the need to change the way they coordinated the activities of employees in their stores. We can observe in the statements of Beatrice and Laura, presented in the results section, that the respondents changed their habits with the establishment of standards to be met by employees and the need to supervise their activities. The mentioned retailers formed the habit of discerning their activities from the activities of store employees. They began to give more attention to the implementation of the tasks referring to the positions they occupied, that is, of the manager-owner of the store.

Respondent Beatriz commented that, over time and while carrying out her activities as a manager-owner of the store, she changed her purposes as to her professional future. She developed the will to act as an entrepreneur and not become an employee at some company. This research result is in agreement with Dewey (1956, p. 42) in the sense that “habit means sensitivity or accessibility to certain classes of fixed stimuli, predilections and aversions, more than mere repetitions of specific acts. Habit means will.” We notice that Beatriz has developed a predisposition (a habit or a desire) to advance in her career by performing the activities of an entrepreneur, opening another business if the closure of her company’s activities in the retail sector was necessary.

When carrying out their activities, respondents became more cautious in dealing with certain types of situations, such as borrowing from banks. On the other hand, clothing retail demanded speed and agility from the respondents to deal with new trends in the industry. This result is in line with the thoughts of Dewey (2010) and Elkjaer (2004, 2013) in the sense that experience is both a process and a product, that is, the change in respondents’ habits to become more quick

and agile to follow the sector's trends represented the result (product) of the learning process that took place because of the transaction – a term highlighted by Elkjaer (2004, 2013) based on the work of John Dewey in the definition of the “experience” concept – between each respondent and his or her work environment.

The question of the context (environment) in which learning processes occur has been discussed by different scholars who carried studies on learning (ANTONACOPOULOU, 2006; ELKJAER, 2004, 2013; ILLERIS, 2013; MARSICK, WATKINS, 2001). In the study of Antonacopoulou (2006), the organizational context exerted a strong influence on the learning of bank managers, but the individual learning of the managers had a negligible impact on learning at the organization level. Differently, in this study, individual learning by retailers significantly influenced learning at the organizational level. As described in the results section, throughout their careers, respondents learned contents related to management of the structural dimension of their organizations (for a discussion concerning organizational structure, see Mintzberg (2003)), that is, when reflect on the problems, found ways to enhance (modify) the division and coordination of work carried out in their companies. Retailers made changes in the practices and processes of their companies. Respondent Beatriz, for example, mentioned that she had had to learn to carry out the task of supervision, giving orders to employees and reporting directly to the store manager – and no longer to the saleswomen – to perform her managerial activity. This result differs from the study of Antonacopoulou (2006), since the author asserts that the individual learning of bank managers had no significant effect on organizational learning. The bank managers were encouraged to copy and imitate other managers rather than innovate by promoting changes in work processes. In their study on learning by branch managers of Caixa Econômica Federal, Melo and Lucena (2007) presented results on the influence of managers' individual learning on learning at the organizational level.

The explanation for this discrepancy appears to be related to the fact that the work environments of the respondents in this study present several similarities with what Mintzberg (2006) calls “entrepreneurial organization,” which differs greatly from the work context of banking organizations studied by Antonacopoulou (2006) and Melo and Lucena (2007). The organizations had a small hierarchy and were small, and the informants concentrated power in decision making. In this context, respondents were able to undertake significant changes in both strategic and operational issues in the management of their companies, something that could not occur in the context of the performance of managers in the studies of Antonacopoulou (2006) and of de Melo and Lucena (2007), which were banks.

6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to understand what manager-owners of small businesses in the retail clothing industry from Florianópolis learn. Based on the ten interviews, we found that retailers have learned specific information and knowledge concerning the fields of purchasing, accounting, computing, marketing, finance, labor law and sales. In addition, retailers began to better understand the products with which they worked and the manufacturing techniques employed in their companies. They were able to get specific information and knowledge in order to find solutions to the problems faced by their companies. We observed that they found ways to satisfy legislation that now required mechanical registration of each sale in the studied companies.

The other learning content highlighted in the results of the study refers to the change in some of the habits of the respondents. They mentioned that they had changed some of their predispositions to act in certain situations of day to day work. A respondent indicated that, over the years, she had become less intransigent in her relationship with others, while another retailer mentioned that she had become less aggressive. Beatriz stated that she had developed

a favorable predisposition to continue carrying out entrepreneurial activities even if, for some reason, there was the need to close down her company. Some respondents highlighted that they had changed the ways they performed their management tasks with respect to employees in their stores. They started to give more attention to delegating responsibilities and to supervising store employees. Thus, the study reinforces the notion of habit developed by Dewey (1956), according to which the essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to modes of reaction in different situations experienced by the person.

Results obtained confirm the thinking of Barnard (1979) that executives perform activities that are not related to the executive functions of the company they manage. The study reinforces the thought of Mintzberg (2010) in the sense that managers play the role of monitors, that is, they seek information relevant to their work, making them the most well-informed people in their companies.

In order to contribute to the expansion of the thought of Barnard (1979), we observed that learning related to the non-executive work of the participants of this research, such as how to learn a sales technique or learn about specific characteristics of the product, in many cases, contributed to executives possessing a broad base of information about operational and strategic issues in their companies. Based on inside information obtained in the different situations of everyday life, respondents had best elements for understanding the problems and their effective treatment. Having established adequately the problems of their units, executives had better conditions to think of viable alternatives for carrying out executive functions (BARNARD, 1979) and coordination of the other members of the organization.

Retailers were able to deal with uncertain situations, such as new legislation, which required mechanical recording of sales. In addition, they engaged in their learning processes, obtaining information and knowledge needed to overcome the difficulties (problems) faced in different sectors of their companies. This reinforces the

concept of Elkjaer (2004, 2013) and Dewey (1956, 2010), which emphasizes, among other things, the engagement of the learner in the investigation of the established problem.

The results of this study differ from some aspects of the study by Antonacopoulou (2006). In the study of that author, it was observed that the organizational context of the banking sector had affected the ways in which managers ascribed meanings to their learning processes and contents, but that managers' individual learning had "a significant impact on organizational learning" (ANTONACOPOULOU, 2006, p. 470). Differently, in this study, learning at the individual level of managers affects organizational level learning. We observed, for example, that in daily work, retailers made changes in the ways they divided and coordinated the various activities of work carried out in their companies. That is, the individual learning of the respondents (construction of meanings about the coordination of organizational activities) affected investigated structural aspects of organizations (for further discussion of organizational structure, see Mintzberg (2003)).

We suggest the development of other studies that aim to understand the learning contents of managers in organizations of other sizes or different sectors of the Brazilian economy. This study presents results on the learning contents of manager-owners of small businesses in the clothing sector Florianópolis, which may be confirmed or challenged by the investigations in other business realities. With the completion of the proposed studies, it will be possible to better understand some of the patterns concerning the learning contents of Brazilian managers in general, such as the types of habits that are developed by managers and the problems established and solved in day to day work.

Another suggestion, with some similarity to the study carried out by Reis (2011), is conducting studies to further investigate the role of managers' reflection in different learning events experienced. These studies may take into consideration some recent debates established around reflection (JORDI, 2011; LE CORNU, 2009), with the aim of better understanding

reflection, present in the complex phenomenon of managers' learning.

Finally, we recommend that research be carried out concerning managers' (or strategists') learning about their own practices or routines, elements that are important for achieving organizational efficiency. These studies may contribute to contemporary debates that have been established by scholars interested in understanding the formation of strategists (WHITTINGTON, 2006; VAARA, WHITTINGTON, 2012) and aspects concerning managers' learning about routines (COHEN, 2007; SILVA, LUCENA, 2012).

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