

## Building competence through social interaction and the organisational environment: A case study

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates how social interaction and organizational context influence employee performance at PT Chemico Surabaya. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research captures firsthand accounts from workers navigating daily tasks. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with six respondents, each chosen for their role and active participation in the department's initiatives. The findings revealed that friendly relations among peers sharply boosted motivation, strengthened teamwork, and cultivated a shared sense of ownership. Similarly, a constructive organizational climate with open leadership, reliable resources, and inclusive practices further uplifts overall output. Together, these insights urge managers to build a culture that prioritizes positive relationships and enabling conditions. This study remains limited by its single-site focus and small sample size, prompting future scholars to extend the inquiry through larger longitudinal studies or cross-firm comparisons.

**Keywords:** Social Interaction, Organizational Environment, Employee Performance, Work Culture, Inter-employee Relations.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized, digitally driven world, the way organizations evaluate their employees has changed markedly. It is no longer sufficient to know the theory; workers must demonstrate that they can turn that knowledge into action when problems arise (Ganeshan & Vethirajan, 2022). Consequently, firms are called to build cultures where conversation flows freely and networks of trust replace formal barriers, allowing skills to grow and morale to strengthen (Ganeshan & Silalahi, 2021; Masunka et al., 2022; Reza & Vethirajan, 2022). Social learning sits at the heart of that process: team members absorb core values, share insights, and pick up tacit know-how simply by being around one another, which in turn boosts output across the board (Reed et al., 2010). The quality of these everyday interactions does more than polish individual talent; it also steers how well groups coordinate and how quickly goals are reached (Babić & Sojkić, 2023). A culture that lives by commonly held beliefs, therefore, becomes a powerful motivator, pushing people to exert extra effort and steering the organization toward better results (Sengke, 2016). Together, practical skills, social exchange, and open communication form a sturdy compass for today's turbulent marketplace. Firms that invest in this tripartite formula place themselves in the strongest position to adopt new trends, adapt to sudden disruptions, and sustain high levels of performance over time (Ganeshan & Vethirajan, 2022) (Babić & Sojkić, 2023).

Social interaction within a workplace extends beyond day-to-day exchanges; it actively shapes how employees develop work habits, professionalism, and the practical skills needed for routine duties. Patterns of communication, team collaboration, shared decision-making, and meaningful feedback form the backbone of these interactions and have a measurable impact on what individuals can achieve at work (Gocevaska & Galevska, 2015; Berger & Luckmann, 2017). Simultaneously, the wider organizational setting, its culture, formal hierarchy, and informal mood guide how people act, cope with setbacks, and take workplace values on board (Singhvi et al., 2022). Cultures that invite participation and reward experimentation create spaces where both specialist knowledge and flexible thinking can grow (Singhvi et al., 2022). Open conversations and cross-functional cooperation in such settings boost creativity by pairing diverse perspectives and driving innovative problem-solving (Kuncoro & Safrizal, 2023). When groups tackle projects together and face well-framed challenges, the social atmosphere becomes a catalyst for higher performance (Kuncoro & Safrizal, 2023). The competencies forged in these exchanges, whether technical, communicative, leadership-oriented, or cognitive, are not just personal assets; they underpin organizational effectiveness as a whole (Puteh et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding how social dynamics mesh with structural features is vital for designing workplaces that sustain engagement, harness productivity, and support long-term success (Puteh et al., 2016; Berger & Luckmann, 2017).

PT Chemico Surabaya operates in the chemical sector and maintains a workforce with diverse backgrounds and skill sets. Because the firm faces a fast-paced work rhythm and requires frequent coordination between departments, its daily routine provides a rich setting for observing how people learn and display their abilities at work. Therefore, this inquiry concentrates on the interplay between everyday social exchanges among staff members and broader organizational features, seeking evidence of how these factors coalesce to produce distinct patterns of competence and performance in real time. Central questions include what employees believe their roles to be, how they navigate the informal links that crisscross the formal hierarchy, and in what ways the prevailing culture and climate shape their behavior, motivation, and skill development. For this reason, the staff serve as the key unit of analysis here, examined both as single contributors carrying out specific tasks and as intertwined actors embedded within the organizational community.

On a theoretical level, this study aims to deepen the existing scholarship on human resource development, work competence, and organizational learning. By situating an employee-centered perspective within both relational and structural frames, the analysis shows how social interactions and the broader organizational context together shape the growth of job-related skills. Such a view highlights the influences that formal performance indicators usually overlook, yet quietly determine how well tasks are done on the ground. From a practical standpoint, this study hopes to equip managers with the insights needed to build a workplace that is more agile, cooperative, and supportive of ongoing employee

competency growth. Design teams, training staff, and strategic planners, as well as line managers, may draw on the results when crafting quality-improvement initiatives, revising human-resource forecasts, and nurturing a culture committed to learning and untapping internal potential.

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates two key perspectives: Spencer and Spencer's Competence Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Together, these frameworks explain how individual capability develops through personal attributes and interactive experiences within the organizational environment.

Spencer and Spencer (1993) conceptualized competence as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance (Brandão & Borges-Andrade, 2021) (Huang et al., 2025). They identified five interrelated dimensions—motives, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills—that collectively shape work behavior. Within the context of PT Chemico Surabaya, these elements manifest when employees demonstrate initiative (motive), adaptability under pressure (trait), confidence in communication (self-concept), technical proficiency (knowledge), and teamwork (skills). Competence thus becomes a dynamic construct, influenced not only by what employees know but also by how they translate that knowledge into context-specific behavior.

Complementing this view, Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) argues that learning occurs through the observation of others' actions, their consequences, and the social reinforcement that follows (Mas'ud, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023). Bandura's principle of *reciprocal determinism*, the mutual influence of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, aligns closely with the dynamics of workplace learning at PT Chemico. Employees acquire tacit and explicit skills by observing role models, imitating successful behaviors, and internalizing organizational norms. This continuous cycle of observation, imitation, and feedback underscores that competence does not emerge in isolation but is socially constructed and refined contextually.

By combining these perspectives, the present study adopts an integrated theoretical stance in which competence development is viewed as a socially mediated process. Individual motivation and capability (Spencer & Spencer) interact with environmental cues and peer modelling (Bandura), producing a holistic explanation of how workplace interactions foster growth. This theoretical integration serves as an analytical lens through which the study interprets employee experiences and skill formation at PT Chemico Surabaya.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive design grounded in case study methodology. This choice allowed the researchers to explore in detail the everyday realities at PT Chemico Surabaya, especially the ways in which permanent staff interacted with interns. By focusing on specific workplace contexts, case studies reveal the stories, routines, and interpretations that shape mentors' and colleagues' experiences alongside newcomers. In turn, this method yields thick, nuanced data and paints a fuller picture of the professional bonds that form—and sometimes fray—during the firm's internship programme.

The research was conducted at PT Chemico Surabaya, the firm that hosted the authors' internship programme, and thus, provided its natural setting. Five staff members were purposefully chosen from different divisions to serve as research informants, ensuring diverse perspectives on the program. All participants had worked closely with the interns, filling roles such as supervisors, human-resource officers, field mentors, and peers. Selecting individuals from these positions aimed to capture detailed insights into guidance, oversight, and the day-to-day experiences encountered by interns.

Although the study engaged only five participants, this purposive, small-sample design is consistent with qualitative inquiry, which seeks *depth over breadth* and aims to generate *analytical* rather than *statistical generalizations*. The focus was on uncovering the meaning participants attached to workplace learning rather than producing quantifiable patterns. Moreover, multiple data sources, interviews, direct observations, and document analyses were triangulated to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Member checking further ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' lived realities.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Result

At the PT Chemico Surabaya office, day-to-day socializing quietly shapes what workers can do, with mentoring, peer chats, and team projects leading the way. Staff repeat that open, frequent talk across levels builds know-how and confidence in their jobs. One employee explained, *'I pick up a lot from seniors on a mixed project because they offer tips before I even ask.'* Much of this learning spills outside official meetings too, popping up in hallways or coffee corners, and people say that those chances to talk speed up task clarity and weld the team together. Another person noted, *'We swap ideas at lunch, and once in a while a quick joke turns into the answer we needed back at our desks.'* Taken together, these easy, ongoing exchanges help everybody-onboarding recruits and long-serving veterans-absorb new lessons much faster than training plans alone could manage.

At PT Chemico Surabaya, the organizational environment is regarded as a critical enabler of employee competency growth. Informants consistently cited an inclusive culture, receptiveness to diverse viewpoints, and visible managerial support as key elements that facilitate on-the-job learning. As one staff member put it, *"Things aren't rigid here; we can speak directly to our manager without navigating a maze of bureaucracy."* Such a supportive climate allows workers to experiment, learn from setbacks, and adopt new methods without fear of harsh penalties. Supplementing this informal learning are structured initiatives, such as in-house training sessions and periodic performance reviews. *"We don't always go to formal classes, but every week we join cross-department knowledge-sharing talks that are really useful,"* another employee noted. This comment exemplifies how firms deliberately build routines that promote ongoing knowledge exchange and gradual skill enhancement.

Evidence from employee self-reports clearly shows that frequent social exchange, alongside an explicitly supportive workplace culture, fuels skill development. The growth horizon that respondents describe goes beyond technical know-how; it also encompasses essential soft skills such as clear communication, agile problem-solving, and an easy fit with changing day-to-day rhythms. One participant illustrated this progression by recalling a time when sharing her views was daunting. Yet, after repeated invitations to team forums, she found her voice and said, *"now I'm more confident."* Another voice pointed to watching peers handle real issues as his primary classroom, noting, *"In my opinion, learning directly from real-life situations is more effective than training. We can see how problems are solved directly on the ground."* Taken together, these accounts confirm that workplace learning thrives on casual mentorship and everyday practice as much as it does on formal programs the firm arranges.

#### 3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the central argument of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement (Amsari et al., 2024; Khadka, 2024). At PT Chemico Surabaya, employees repeatedly emphasized that learning unfolds naturally within peer interactions during project meetings, informal discussions or mentoring sessions (Mangal et al., 2024; Klug et al., 2016). As one respondent described, *"I learn most effectively by watching how senior staff handle problems and then trying the same approach in my own work."* This aligns with Bandura's notion of *modelling*, where observing competent peers provides both a behavioral template and a motivational stimulus (Mangal et al., 2024). Thus, mentorship and teamwork act as organizational mechanisms through which observational learning becomes embedded in daily routines.

In parallel, the results affirm the tenets of Spencer and Spencer's Competence Theory, particularly the interplay between *knowledge*, *skills*, and *self-concept* (Suwarsito, 2020; Meinhardt et al., 2018; Yusuf & Abiddin, 2018). Employees who receive consistent feedback and recognition display greater confidence and initiative behavioral outcomes that signify the internalization of competence (Rozi et al., 2024). For instance, several informants linked their growing assertiveness and communication skills to repeated

exposure to inclusive discussions and open managerial support (Yusuf & Abiddin, 2018). This supports Spencer and Spencer's claim that high-level performance is driven not only by technical mastery but also by the alignment of personal attributes with organizational expectations (Asiska et al., 2024).

When analyzed together, both theoretical lenses reveal a synergistic relationship between social and structural factors (Gocevska & Galevska, 2015; Mylyanyk, 2022). Bandura's model explains *how* competence is transmitted through social learning, modelling, and reinforcement, while Spencer and Spencer's framework explains *what* components of competence are developed and sustained through this process (Gocevska & Galevska, 2015). The social environment at PT Chemico functions as a *learning ecosystem*, where interpersonal exchange (the "how") nurtures the formation of multi-dimensional competencies (the "what"). This synthesis underscores that effective competence development in contemporary organisations depends on aligning relational dynamics with structured competency frameworks (Karpf, 2015).

Furthermore, this study contributes empirically by showing that informal peer interaction and formal organizational climate jointly accelerate skill acquisition (Kerlin, 2016). Employees reported that open communication and trust-based relationships enabled them to experiment without fear of failure, mirroring the *supportive learning environment* required for sustained competence growth (Holt et al., 2016; Janakiraman & Ramachandran, 2015). These insights expand both theories beyond their traditional boundaries, suggesting that competence formation is best understood as a socially co-constructed phenomenon influenced by reciprocal interactions among individuals, peers, and organizational systems (Nowosad, 2024; Holt et al., 2016; Kerlin, 2016; Herlo, 2018).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Research carried out at PT Chemico Surabaya shows that the way workers interact with one another and the general atmosphere of the workplace are key in creating a productive and harmonious climate. Staff members identify open communication, mutual respect, and a spirit of collaboration as vital features that make them feel comfortable and effective in their tasks. Moreover, an organizational environment marked by leadership willing to consider feedback and reliable resources further boosts employees sense of belonging and personal motivation. Together, these insights highlight that the social and cultural dimensions of a company significantly drive performance and job satisfaction, especially in manufacturing settings such as PT Chemico Surabaya.

The results outlined above offer practical takeaways for both employers and educators seeking to facilitate the school-to-work transition. Businesses, in particular, should reconsider their internship and onboarding programmes, weaving in social and relational components so that new hires feel included and start delivering value sooner. Educators could partner with employers to shape internship curricula that reflect day-to-day workplace realities, closing the persistent gap between classroom learning and industry demand, and thus graduating students who are more resilient and adaptable in a volatile labor market.

Despite its valuable insights, this study is limited by certain limitations. First, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as informants could present socially desirable responses or omit critical information. Second, the single-site scope restricts the ability to generalize the findings beyond PT Chemico Surabaya. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating multisite case comparisons, longitudinal tracking of competence growth, or mixed-method designs that combine interviews with objective performance data. Triangulating self-reports with supervisor evaluations or observational metrics would further minimize bias and provide a richer understanding of workplace learning processes.

#### **Ethical Approval**

Not Applicable

#### **Informed Consent Statement**

Not Applicable

### **Authors' Contributions**

DRM contributed to conceptualization, research design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. He also served as the corresponding author and coordinated the revisions and communication during the review process. LAM assisted in developing the theoretical framework, interpreting the findings, and refining the discussion section. AC provided guidance on methodological design, supervised the overall research process, and reviewed the manuscript for academic consistency and clarity.

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The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author for privacy.

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