

Organizational Learning for the Establishment and Development of Enterprises¹

การเรียนรู้ขององค์กรเพื่อการก่อตั้งและพัฒนาวิสาหกิจ

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Abstract

Enterprises were significant organizations for job creation and economic development. In Thailand, the advancement of enterprises was promoted through government policies that encouraged the utilization of knowledge for enterprise development. However, there were few studies related to organizational learning (OL) in the TCI database over the past ten years. This effort is sought to generate income for the population and stimulate economic circulation. This research recognized the importance of establishing and developing enterprises and thus studied 1) the characteristics of organizational learning (OL) in the establishment and development of enterprises, and 2) the challenges encountered in OL during the establishment and development of enterprises from successful enterprises. The study selected co-founders or managers experienced in the early or early-expansion stages from enterprises established for 5 to 10 years. The enterprises were operating in the digital era that had successfully received government tax support as targeted businesses. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a dynamic interviewing approach were employed, and data saturation was reached at 17 informants. From the thematic analysis, the findings revealed that OL during enterprise establishment and development was divided into three stages: the early stage, the expansion stage, and the maturity stage. Key roles were played by co-founders, top-level executives, senior managers, mid-level managers, and operational employees at each respective stage. The results explained the OL processes, the challenges faced in each stage, and how obstacles were overcome. It also presented a model for establishing and developing enterprises in Thailand through OL.

Keywords: Development, Enterprise, Establishment, Organizational learning

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บทคัดย่อ

วิสาหกิจเป็นองค์กรประเภทหนึ่งที่มีความสำคัญต่อการสร้างงานและการพัฒนาเชิงเศรษฐกิจ โดยประเทศไทยมีการส่งเสริมความก้าวหน้าของวิสาหกิจผ่านนโยบายรัฐบาล ซึ่งผลักดันการพัฒนาความรู้เพื่อใช้ในการพัฒนาวิสาหกิจ ทั้งนี้เพื่อเป็นการสร้างรายได้แก่ประชากรของประเทศและส่งเสริมการหมุนเวียนของเศรษฐกิจ อย่างไรก็ตามฐานข้อมูลดัชนีการอ้างอิงวารสารไทยปรากฏงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการเรียนรู้ขององค์กรน้อยมากใน 10 ปีที่ผ่านมา งานวิจัยนี้เล็งเห็นความสำคัญของการก่อตั้งและการสร้างวิสาหกิจจึงมุ่งเน้นศึกษา 1) ลักษณะเฉพาะของการเรียนรู้ขององค์กรในการก่อตั้งและพัฒนาวิสาหกิจ และ 2) ความท้าทายที่พบในการเรียนรู้ขององค์กรในการก่อตั้งและพัฒนาวิสาหกิจ โดยมุ่งเน้นการเก็บประสบการณ์จากวิสาหกิจที่ประสบความสำเร็จ และคัดเลือกผู้ร่วมก่อตั้ง ผู้บริหารระดับสูงหรือระดับกลางที่อยู่ในช่วงก่อตั้งวิสาหกิจหรือช่วงเริ่มขยายตัวในกลุ่มวิสาหกิจเริ่มต้นที่ก่อตั้งมา 5 – 10 ปี ซึ่งเป็นองค์กรในยุคดิจิทัลและประสบความสำเร็จจากการได้รับรองให้เป็นกิจการเป้าหมายที่รัฐให้การสนับสนุนด้านภาษีและดำเนินการสัมภาษณ์ถึงโครงสร้างแบบพลวัตจนข้อมูลอิ่มตัวที่ 17 คน ทั้งนี้จากการวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระผลวิจัยพบว่า การเรียนรู้ในช่วงก่อตั้งและพัฒนาวิสาหกิจ แบ่งออกเป็น 3 ระยะ ได้แก่ ระยะเริ่มต้น ระยะขยายตัว และระยะเต็มวัย ซึ่งมีผู้ร่วมก่อตั้ง ผู้บริหารระดับสูง ผู้บริหารระดับกลาง และผู้ปฏิบัติงานเป็นผู้มีบทบาทสำคัญตามลำดับ โดยอธิบายกระบวนการการเรียนรู้ขององค์กร ความท้าทายในแต่ละระยะ รวมถึงการก้าวข้ามอุปสรรค และนำเสนอต้นแบบของการก่อตั้งและพัฒนาวิสาหกิจในประเทศไทยผ่านการเรียนรู้ขององค์กร

คำสำคัญ: การพัฒนา วิสาหกิจ การก่อตั้ง การเรียนรู้ขององค์กร

Introduction

Thailand has been advancing enterprise development through key legislation, including the Small and Medium Enterprise Promotion Act, the Community Enterprise Promotion Act, and the Social Enterprise Promotion Act. The empirical evidence was the establishment of the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP) in 2000. It was responsible for launching annual action plans that further underscore this dedication (Wattanawittayanukul et al., 2022). In the recent agenda, the 2025 plan emphasized comprehensive growth by creating an environment conducive to business growth. It also focused on developing entrepreneurial skills and improving existing enterprises at various stages. Additionally, the plan expected the transition of farmers to entrepreneurs through enterprise establishment (Phumpueng & Jongjakapun, 2022). Besides the OSMEP agenda, Thailand has been promoting enterprise development through the National Competitiveness Enhancement for Targeted Industries Act, B.E. 2560 (2017), which extended support to startups and recognized them as economic drivers. The legal support reflected Thailand's recognition of the need to provide knowledge and skills for enterprise development in fostering competitiveness, as enterprises accounted for the majority of employment and drove much of the economic activity (Pholphirul, 2013; Phumpueng & Jongjakapun, 2022). Thailand reaffirmed this commitment by replacing the Non-Formal and Informal Education Promotion Act, B.E. 2551 with the Learning Promotion Act, B.E. 2566. The Act emphasized learning for career development and placed a stronger focus on human capital as a driver of economic growth (Soontornwiwattana, 2024). From the Thai government initiatives, it encouraged learning in individuals, which extends the results of organizational learning (OL) for enterprise establishment and development.

There was a shift of interest in studies from enterprises to startup businesses in recent years. However, previous studies in Thailand had shown ambiguity in the definitions and learning of enterprises and startups. A Thai startup can be classified as a small and medium enterprise (SME) (Wongchankit & Akaraborwon, 2024). Furthermore, earlier research on enterprises and startups in Thailand had demonstrated similarities in organizational studies, showing that employee learning and development within enterprises could benefit from applying human resource and organization development concepts (Soontornwiwattana & Sorakraikitikul, 2018; Wongchankit & Akaraborwon, 2024). This indicated that organizational development, including organizational learning, was applicable in both startups and enterprises. Therefore, potential startups could be served as effective models for studying OL and development, particularly during establishment, as their primary focus was on survival in the early and expansion stages (Schuh et al., 2022). This study examined the successful startups as enterprises, focusing on those that qualified for capital gains tax exemption from Thai government agencies. These enterprises were certified by the National Innovation Agency, the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), or the Digital Economy Promotion Agency as meeting the requirement of utilizing targeted industries and generating at least 80% of their revenue from specific sectors. The potential of these enterprises attracted investment, generated employment, and stimulated economic expansion. Additionally, it positioned them as models for developing other newly established enterprises in the digital era.

Although the Thai government supported learning for development, research specifically focusing on OL in enterprises remained underdeveloped over the past decade in the TCI database. Support plans for learning and skill development among entrepreneurs existed, they primarily focused on individual entrepreneurs rather than enterprises as a whole. While Thai researchers are aware of the support provided by organizational learning (OL) for innovation creation. However, over the ten years, fewer than 40 research studies on OL for driving enterprise development published in the TCI database (Thai-Journal Citation Index Centre), particularly regarding practical OL for the establishment and development of enterprises. The absence of holistic OL for development research has hindered the sustainable founding and growth of enterprises. To address this gap, learning-driven approaches for establishing and developing enterprises are necessary. This research thus aimed to identify the characteristics of organizational learning (OL) in establishing and developing enterprises while addressing the challenges encountered in OL during the establishment and development of enterprises. The results will drive other enterprises to assess their organizational stages, apply organizational learning (OL) concepts, and ultimately grow into key drivers of the country's economic progress.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the characteristics of organizational learning (OL) in the establishment and development of enterprises.
2. To examine the challenges encountered in organizational learning (OL) during the establishment and development of enterprises.

Literature Review

The concepts related to the establishment and development of enterprises are closely tied to the organizational life cycle, encompassing an organization's birth, growth to maturity, and eventual decline (Adizes, 1979; Greiner, 1998; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Quinn & Cameron, 1983). Greiner's (1998) model of 'Evolution and Revolution in Organizations,' which was a widely recognized traditional model, divided organizational growth into five stages: Creativity, Direction, Delegation, Coordination, and Collaboration. The model partially aligned with Adizes' (1979) 'Organizational Passages,' outlining stages from Courtship, Infant, Go-Go, and Adolescent to Prime and Maturity. Adizes further described the leading to decline as how organizations often transition into aristocratic and bureaucratic structures before their collapse. Later concepts, such as Quinn and Cameron's (1983) 'Initiation and Renewal,' introduced the role of innovation (Jirásek & Bílek, 2018) during the Maturity stage to sustain growth and avoid decline. These principles were widely cited in past years. Most of them were based on the assumption that resource accumulation—both human resources and tools—brought the crises of change at every growth stage. Greiner (1998) emphasized that organizations must undergo revolutionary changes at each stage to address management challenges and sustain growth, highlighting the increasing difficulties in managing human resources and functional divisions as they expand. Similar to Adizes (1979), Quinn and Cameron (1983) noted that each subsequent growth stage requires additional resources, particularly time for planning and managing a growing workforce. There was a shift after the digital revolution due to technological advancements and the rise of online platforms, allowing enterprises to slow down hiring and large-scale investments. Many enterprises in 2024 managed to reduce their reliance on human labor and other resources through this shift, which changed the focus towards enterprise development (Schuh et al., 2022) and influenced the need for concept refinement. The organizational learning and development concept evolved amidst changing environments.

A relevant concept was Miller and Friesen's (1984) five-stage organizational life cycle, which included Birth, Growth, Maturity, Revival, and Decline. Recent model of startup development in 2024 has not apparently changed. These models remained applicable to the life cycle of startup enterprises (Jirásek & Bílek, 2018). An analysis of traditional and contemporary organizational development literature indicated that the Maturity and Revival stages could occur simultaneously. Without renewal, organizations would quickly enter the Decline stage. The recent organizational life cycle was thus summarized as comprising three growth stages—Early, Expansion, and Maturity—and one Decline stage, as illustrated in Table 1. Furthermore, the Early, Expansion, and Maturity stages represented the Establishment and Development phases of enterprises.

Table 1 Organization growth and stages

		Greiner (1998)	Adizes (1979)	Quinn and Cameron (1983)	Miller and Friesen (1984)	Schuh et al. (2022)
Establishment and Development	1. Early stage	1. Creativity 2. Direction	1. Courtship 2. Infant stage 3. Go-Go stage	1. Entrepreneurial 2. Collectivity	1. Birth or Founding stage	1. Early stage 2. Research and development stage
	2. Expansion stage	3. Delegation 4. Coordination	4. Adolescent stage 5. Prime stage	3. Formalization and control	2. Growth stage	3. Growth stage
	3. Maturity stage	5. Collaboration	6. Maturity stage	4. Elaboration of structure	3. Maturity stage 4. Revival stage	4. Late stage
Decline	4. Decline stage		7. Aristocracy stage 8. Early Bureaucracy stage 9. Bureaucracy stage		5. Decline and Demise stage	5. Exit stage

Previous research in Thailand highlighted human resource capacity and organizational structure such as team management and limited resource challenges which affected learning effectiveness. However, the previous findings often lacked a focus on OL, which involves acquiring and developing knowledge to strengthen organization. To address this gap, this research aimed to explore the characteristic of OL that supports advancement at each stage of growth. Moreover, this study encouraged OL principles to be applied for Thai enterprise development, and promoting sustainable development and growth.

OL is often presented under the concept of the learning loops, which Crossan et al. (1999) 4I's model involves intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing through feedback and feedforward. The learning occurs at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Bratianu, 2015; Crossan et al., 1999). These concept is based on self-reflection through action, referred to as single-loop learning, and system and mindset review, referred to as double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). However, the learning loops concept needed clearly specify how organizations begin or progress to subsequent stages but does explain that OL can help renew and develop the organization.

Another OL principle was the Huber's (1991) concept which closely aligned with the stages of organizational growth. The concept proposed several forms of OL, including:

- 1) Congenital learning: Learning from the founders' former knowledge, as newly established organizations rely on inherited knowledge.
- 2) Experiential learning: Learning through experimentation and reflection on organizational performance, whether intentional or unintentional.
- 3) Vicarious learning: Second-hand knowledge gained from competitors or other organizations, such as consulting firms and knowledge networks.
- 4) Grafting: Transplanting knowledge by bringing knowledgeable individuals into the organization to quickly replicate their expertise.
- 5) Searching and Noticing: Searching for and observing external environmental information, delving into specific problems and opportunities, and monitoring performance to meet goals.

In recent years, the principles of OL have been developed and linked to knowledge management (KM) and learning organization (LO) frameworks (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). OL focused on the process of learning, emphasizing theoretical understanding before moving into practical applications, as was commonly done in KM and LO. However, OL alone were insufficient to fully describe the growth stages of enterprises. Therefore, the organizational life cycle was considered to classify the distinction at each stage. Meanwhile digitalization is accelerating organizational development (Schuh et al., 2024; Uppapong et al., 2022). International research has focused on mastering digital transformation through the learning process (Konopik et al., 2022). To promote the enterprises in the digital revolution, research addressing the characteristics and challenges of promoting OL at different stages of Thai enterprises became necessary. This research, therefore, aimed to investigate the role of OL, particularly in the digital era, throughout the organizational life cycle, focusing on the establishment and development of organizations at each stage of growth, while also identifying the challenges organizations encounter in their learning processes. The findings are intended to provide insights into the success of enterprises structured as organizations by applying organizational learning more practically.

Methodology

This qualitative research identified the characteristics and examined the challenges of OL using a phenomenological approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007) were employed, with open-ended questions to gain detailed insights. The questions were arranged into six areas: success and history, learning at each stage, essential knowledge at each stage, change and development, knowledge transfer, and cautions in development. The study selected the startup enterprises which generating at least 80% of their revenue from their sectors and certified by a government agency to receive capital gains tax support. A selection method, based on Guest et al. (2006), was used to ensure data validity with six or more participants as homogeneous. Data were collected until saturation was reached. The informant criteria included: 1) being a founder or co-founder (referred to as co-founder in this study), or a manager with experience in the early stage or early expansion stage, and 2) being part of an organization established for 5 to 10 years, qualifying it as a successful new organization in the digital era. Ethical consent was obtained prior to each interview, and confidentiality was maintained by encoding participants' identities as 'OG' followed by a number. The number represents the organization. Codes used as pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. The study reached data saturation with 17 interviewees, including co-founders, top-level, senior, and mid-level managers, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Details of informants' positions and organization ages

No.	Code	Position	Age of Organization
1	OG1	Co-founder	5
2	OG2	Mid-level Manager	5
3	OG3	Mid-level Manager	5
4	OG4	Mid-level Manager	6
5	OG5	Co-founder	7
6	OG6	Mid-level Manager	7
7	OG7	Senior Manager	8
8	OG8	Senior Manager	8
9	OG9	Top-level Manager	8
10	OG10	Mid-level Manager	8
11	OG11	Top-level Manager	9
12	OG12	Co-founder	9
13	OG13	Co-founder	9
14	OG14	Co-founder	9
15	OG15	Mid-level Manager	9
16	OG16	Co-founder	10
17	OG17	Mid-level Manager	10

Data were validated through triangulation by 1) examining the interview data, 2) observing interview dynamics, such as anxiety and emotional emphasis, and 3) confirming the data with informants after transcription. The results were additionally validated with a literature review. The study followed ethical standards by excluding organizational names and registered capital, rather using coded names to protect business interests, while disclosing participant positions to meet research objectives. After data collection, thematic analysis was performed by reviewing data frequency. The information was analyzed from multiple sources, with quotes from informants. The results were illustrated in each research theme.

Results

The research on enterprise establishment and development highlighted organizational growth at each stage. Combined with the organizational life cycle concept, it could be classified into three stages of OL: early, expansion, and maturity. Each stage addressed key actors who influenced the learning process and faced distinct challenges. The findings described the characteristics of OL across each stage of enterprise establishment and development, according to objective 1, and the challenges according to objective 2.

Characteristics of OL in the establishment and development

During the early stage of an enterprise, key actors like co-founders played crucial roles. Interviews revealed that co-founders, board members, and early-stage managers could clearly articulate the OL process and challenges. Data addressing the first research objective showed that co-founders primarily engaged in experiential learning through hands-on experience and practice. This learning was combined with the pre-existing abilities of co-founders and founding teams, referred to as congenital learning. The characteristics of OL in the early stage was shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Characteristics of OL in the early stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Congenital Learning	“In the beginning, we had to rely on our prior knowledge. We had worked in small organizations and often managed things on our own.” (OG5, OG16, OG9)
Experiential Learning	“We used part of our previous knowledge, but much of it was trial and error.” (OG16, OG9) “The key to success was the resources we accumulated over the years—knowledge, experience, relationships with related businesses, and a reputation built on integrity.” (OG5) “There were many things we thought we knew, but soon realized we didn’t.” (OG16)

The co-founders and managers expressed a wide range of emotions and reflections on their organizational journey through the interviews, particularly regarding their learning processes OG5 and OG16, who were co-founders, displayed confidence when recounting their reliance on prior knowledge during the early stages, their animated tone reflecting a strong connection to those formative experiences. However, when discussing experiential learning, particularly the role of trial and error, their demeanor became more reflective, especially when acknowledging mistakes made along the way. The research findings indicate that, in the early stages of establishment and development, organizational learning (OL) was heavily influenced by both congenital learning and experiential learning.

The research findings revealed that enterprises had to manage increased workloads during the expansion stage. Therefore, the focus was on developing systems and standards to maintain workflows and ensure legal compliance. As profitability became more predictable, efforts shifted to creating efficient processes, recruiting skilled personnel, and aligning legal frameworks for sustainable growth. OL in this stage occurred through two key methods: grafting—integrating knowledge and practices from other organizations—and searching and noticing—actively seeking solutions to standardize systems and address challenges. The OL theme for the expansion stage is shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Characteristics of OL in the expansion stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Grafting	“At this stage, hiring experienced people became essential. With more clients and growing stability, we had to manage more resources and no longer had time ourselves.” (OG13) “I used my past experience to build the systems, and now the systems can run themselves.” (OG7)
Searching and Noticing	“Work systems are critical. When I joined, I was already expected to fix these issues.” (OG6) “We were searching for the best-suited solution to standardize the working systems. Without standardization, we couldn’t grow.” (OG7)

Co-founders and managers revealed that the learning approach during the expansion stage occurred particularly through grafting and searching and noticing. OG13, who was a co-founder, acknowledged the need for external expertise to handle increased resources. The co-founder expressed relief after responsibility sharing. Senior managers, such as OG7, took pride in using past experiences to create efficient systems. OG11, who was a top-level manager, highlighted the need to standardize work systems for future growth. In summary, the expansion stage involved grafting, which incorporated external knowledge to create standardized systems. To streamline operation systems and manage expanding workloads, the learning of searching and noticing would be applied during this stage.

The results revealed that OL during the maturity stage differed from earlier phases, focusing on system refinement and addressing new challenges. Mid-level managers and operational employees played a key role in driving learning through organizational self-appraisal. Single-loop and double-loop learning were applied to review and improve underlying systems for efficiency. The interview findings and themes are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 Characteristics of OL in the maturity stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Organizational Self-Appraisal	“Operational employees do not need to establish a new system; they should learn the existing work systems. Their previous experiences will provide comparative lessons to improve the established systems.” (OG10)
	“We used a verification method, informing subordinates that if there was a step they couldn’t explain the purpose of, that step might be unnecessary and would need to be reviewed.” (OG8)
Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning	“When mistakes or delays occur in the work system, we must review whether our actions were correct. Previously, we questioned whether the system we established was too cumbersome.” (OG10)
	“When operational groups perform according to the system, they immediately recognize necessary adjustments or changes due to the constantly changing environment.” (OG6)

From the observations during interviews, mid-level managers played a crucial role in refining and improving established systems through organizational self-appraisal. They frequently emphasized continuous evaluation. OG10, who was a mid-level manager, noted that operational employees' feedback was valuable for developing processes. OG8 employed verification methods to identify inefficiencies in the process and tried practical tools for operational streamlining. OG10 applied single-loop and double-loop learning by questioning whether established systems had become overly complex. In the maturity stage, OL primarily involved refining existing systems rather than creating new ones. In conclusion, mid-level managers and operational employees played key roles in using single-loop and double-loop learning as organizational self-appraisal at the maturity stage. It was intended to address both immediate issues and ensure underlying assumptions.

Challenges encountered in OL during the establishment and development

The findings examined the challenges through the interview according to the objective 2. In the early stage, the co-founders recognized the dual nature of their accumulated resources—pride in their achievements, but also underlying anxiety about the fragility of these assets. Conversations around ethical dilemmas were more reserved. OG1 and OG5. They reflected on the tension between short-term gains and long-term reputational risks. Visible discomfort has shown during interviews. Discussions about sales and marketing were marked by a sense of urgency, in contrast to ethics. Co-founders emphasized the steep learning curve and pressure to succeed in these areas. There was no conclusions about ethical standards in the survival stage. However, product and service development was conventionally viewed as essential to survival, with managers like OG11 adopting a pragmatic tone about the need to balance quality with sales efforts.

Co-founders initially relied on their prior knowledge from past ventures (congenital learning), which provided a foundation but quickly revealed its limitations as the business grew. Consequently, experiential learning—learning through trial and error—became a central aspect of the co-founders' journey, particularly when facing the challenges of sales, marketing, and product/service development. The challenges in the early stage were summarized and shown in table 6.

Table 6 Challenges of OL during the establishment and development in the early stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Ethical Dilemma	“Poaching clients or lowering standards due to economic conditions happens in the industry. It’s hard to say if it’s a sales strategy or deceit.” (OG1) “We faced difficult decisions, like taking clients from competitors using questionable methods. While it might have led to profit, we wouldn’t be able to face others.” (OG5)
Sales and Marketing Skills	“Sales and marketing skills were crucial during the initial period.” (OG16) “Those skills (sales and marketing) were the lifeblood of the organization.” (OG14)
Product/Service Development Skills	“Both product/service development and sales contribute to cash flow, which is essential for survival.” (OG9) “If we have products or services but can’t sell them, they’re useless. Likewise, if we can sell but the products or services aren’t good, we won’t survive.” (OG11)

During the expansion stage, the organization faced difficulties related to legal knowledge and administrative skills, highlighting the need for expertise in these areas to maintain stability. Legal compliance emerged as a major challenge, with OG9 stressing the pressure to meet regulatory standards, especially in documenting employee training. The development of administrative systems was also essential. OG16 emphasized balancing legal requirements with operational efficiency in order to support long-term growth. The introduction of experienced personnel was crucial for managing growing complexity. Legal compliance and administration development were critical challenges, requiring expertise in management and legal processes to ensure sustainable growth. The theme was shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Challenges of OL during the establishment and development in the expansion stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Legal Knowledge	“We can no longer rely on trust, verbal agreements, or informal practices; we must provide tangible evidence and coordinate legally with government agencies.” (OG11) “With over 100 employees, we need proof of training submissions to the Department of Skill Development. There is no excuse.” (OG09)
Administration Skills	“When I joined, I had to figure things out on my own as there weren’t many systems in place.” (OG7) “As the workload grew, we developed systems to streamline work and comply with legal requirements when hiring more staff.” (OG16)

Challenges included success traps and cultural reliance, which resulted in innovation limitation and resistance to change. The enterprises might get stuck in long-standing practices at this stage. From the interviews, mid-level managers acted on feedback from operational employees, trying to meet changing demands with quick adjustments. OG17, who experienced success traps, stated that executives might rely on past successes and become complacent at this stage. Meanwhile, the experience shared by OG4 indicated that he observed reluctance to adopt new methods due to long-standing practices. OG16 shared an example of facing the success trap. He dismantled outdated structures to survive during the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning during this stage involved system refinement and overcoming organizational inertia. Challenges of the success trap, which was cultural resistance, slowed progress. The interview findings and themes are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Challenges of OL during the establishment and development in the maturity stage

Theme	Coding and Example of Interview Data
Success Traps	“Warning higher-level executives also carries the risk that they may fall into the trap of past successes.” (OG17)
Cultural Resistance	“What obstructs learning are phrases like, ‘We have done it this way for a long time,’ or ‘How can we be sure that the new way will be better?’” (OG4) “The COVID-19 period was a clear challenge; if we did not change, we would be changed. At that time, we almost entirely dismantled the old structure.” (OG16)

Discussion and Conclusion

Organizational learning (OL) in the establishment and development of enterprises integrated interdisciplinary concepts by combining principles from OL and the organizational life cycle. This study, thus, presented the characteristics and the challenges of OL in the establishment and development of enterprises through three stages: early, expansion, and maturity. Unlike previous models of organizational growth, such as Greiner's (1998) model—which categorized growth into creative, directional, delegation, coordination, and collaboration stages—this approach addressed contemporary needs shaped by the 21st-century technological and digital revolution. Earlier growth models, developed before these advancements, fell short in explaining modern organizational dynamics. Although more recent research, like that of Rohmani et al. (2021), primarily focused on founders' dreams and well-resourced investors, they were less applicable to other types of enterprises.

Characteristics of OL in the organizational life cycle

Compared to Greiner's (1998) model of organizational life cycle, the study found the similarity that co-founders prioritized accelerating sales to generate cash flow for survival at the beginning. Afterwards, the organization transitioned into the directional phase after sales grew. Production efficiency and quality standards would become essential. This phase often overlapped with the early stage which co-founders used their prior knowledge to boost sales while improving efficiency. In this stage, OL focused on accelerating sales and improving production efficiency, consistent with Greiner's (1998) concept of organizational growth. This stage resembled the startup's early stage and research and development stage. Co-founders, laid the foundation for learning at this stage. Xie et al. (2020) highlighted how entrepreneurs' networks supported learning through their prior competencies, aligning with Huber's concept of congenital learning. Additionally, experiential learning played an essential approach because organizations could not fully rely on existing knowledge due to their novel context. Politis and Gabrielsson (2007) emphasized that successful entrepreneurs learned from mistakes through experimentation, further reinforcing experiential learning (Huber, 1991). Recently, the integration of technology further blurred the lines between Greiner's directional phase and the early stage, as modern enterprises used technology to reduce costs in both management and production (Suo et al., 2023). This technological shift extended the transition into the delegation and coordination phases, where hiring experts became critical for establishing efficient systems.

According to Huber's (1991) principles, grafting from external expertises and searching and noticing were essential in developing systems under a particular context (Safari et al., 2023). OL activities in this stage centered on enhancing production efficiency, expanding markets, and creating standardized systems (Greiner, 1998; Quinn & Cameron, 1983). This phase resembled the growth and market expansion phases in startup growth models (Spender, 2017). It required experienced expertise in order to implement new systems for rapid growth. This approach, described as grafting or borrowing knowledge from external sources (Huber, 1991; Safari et al., 2023), helped organizations adapt to new market environments. As the enterprise expanded, it also had to address legal considerations, including the Commercial Registration Act, tax laws, the Labor Protection Act, and the Labor Skill Development and Promotion Act.

OL in the maturity stage differed from traditional startup growth concepts, which suggested market exit (Saminathan & Darshan, 2020; Wennberg et al., 2010). Instead, OL of enterprises in Thailand focused on problem-solving and innovation creation. Mid-level managers and operational employees were the key in this stage. The learning was in line with Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I's framework, where individuals, teams, and organizations participated in the OL process. Organizational self-appraisal (Huber, 1991), which is defined as both single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), was critical in this stage, as organizations reviewed outcomes and questioned underlying systems to adapt to industry changes. In the organizational life cycle, Greiner (1998) proposed that organizations enter a coordination stage, integrating knowledge from other businesses and advancing toward problem-solving and innovation in the collaboration stage. However, today's enterprises used mergers for expansion and to acquire innovations from other organizations as well (Suo et al., 2023). This research, therefore, presented a development at maturity stage, where organizations learned from reviewing their operational performance and might pursue mergers to stay competitive.

Challenges encountered in OL

This research presented the challenges encountered in each stage of organizational learning (OL) during the establishment and development of enterprises. Enterprises should prioritize addressing significant challenges rather than solving pointless problems simultaneously. Research on ethical decision-making and organizational culture creation suggested establishing ethical standards (Fatmawati et al., 2024), which is crucial in the early stage. Failing to establish clear ethical standards at the early stage jeopardizes the development of corporate governance. It would impact formalization at the subsequent stage, which relates to legal aspects, and hinder the optimization of employee engagement (Koeswayo et al., 2024) and recruitment, particularly in later stages. Although the expansion was delayed due to technological support issues, expansion requires management and legal knowledge. It was similar to traditional concepts, such as those proposed by Adizes (1979) and Greiner (1998). While laws and regulations were less critical in the early stage, they became essential during expansion, providing a foundation for stability. Striking a balance between working systems and employee creativity was crucial for long-term growth (Skorková, 2020). After operating systems are executed day after day, they become crystallized with a belief in their success. In the maturity stage, organizations continually review their performance. Challenges arose from reliance on past successes and outdated regulations, which conflicted with evolving social dynamics and stifled employee creativity. This situation was described as a success trap (Chen & Lin, 2023). The findings presented the characteristics and challenges of OL during the establishment and development of enterprises, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9 Characteristics and challenges of OL during the establishment and development

Greiner's (1972) concept		Establishment & Development stages	Key actors	OL	Challenges
Growth stages	Objectives				
Creativity	Market and Sales	Early stage	Co-founder team	Experiential learning, Congenital learning	Ethical dilemma, Product/service development skills, Sales & Marketing skills
Direction	Production efficiency				
Delegation	Expansion of market	Expansion stage	Top-level and Mid-level managers	Grafting, Searching and Noticing	Legal knowledge, Administration skills
Coordination	Consolidation of organization				
Collaboration	Problem solving and innovation	Maturity stage	Mid-level managers and officers	Self-Appraisal, Single-loop and Double-loop learning	Success traps, Culture resistance

Due to the gap over a decade in the TCI database regarding practical OL, this study provided a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and challenges of OL during the establishment and development of enterprises. Practical OL concepts for Thai enterprises were developed in order to enable organizations to access, analyze, and refine their processes according to stage-specific objectives. The study was expected to foster long-term economic stability through effective OL implementation.

Limitation and Future Research

This research focused on organizational learning (OL) only during the establishment and development. The organizational life cycle concept was considered as stages of growth. However, the research did not expand to the decline stage due to the active enterprises as informants. Future studies might discover the challenges during decline or failure of enterprises that have ceased or closed. It would provide a more complete understanding of the Thai enterprise life cycle.

Additionally, the study participants were enterprises supported by national agencies, without considering the specific contexts of communities or local cultures. Future research could apply the OL concept to community enterprises or different settings, allowing for comparisons of OL similarities and differences across various environments.

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