

# Exploring organizational learning and experimental logistics development at the global fashion retailer H&M

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## Abstract

A logistics learning capability based on an experimental “test-and-learn” approach holds the key to unlock logistics operations as a major competitive weapon in the current landscape of retailing. The purpose of this study is to empirically explore the characteristics of such a logistics learning capability, and to describe the corresponding logistics development practices. The research is based on an action research approach conducted at the Swedish fashion retailer H&M. During a period of 18 months, data has been collected through observations, informal discussions and interviews, and findings have been refined in two major cycles. The case of H&M offers insights into real existing learning and development practices at a retail company that operates in a highly competitive and complex retail landscape, characterized in particular by its process towards improved omni-channel practices. The findings elaborate the four logistics learning components of culture, structure, relationships, and speed. Furthermore, five of H&M’s logistics development practices are described and defined as experimental logistics development. In contrast to traditional development processes in which analysis is followed by lengthy linear implementation and evaluation phases, these practices are characterized by an experimental, “test-and-learn” approach with short feedback loops and iterative development processes.

## KEYWORDS

action research, logistics development practices, logistics learning capability, organizational learning, supply chain management

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The retail industry is currently undergoing a number of critical changes due to factors such as rapid technology development, the launch of new business models, and an increased focus on sustainability in society. New business opportunities are continuously emerging, but only for those retailers that have the capacity to face them and seize

them in a timely and appropriate manner. In this context, logistics has increasingly been acknowledged as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. In fact, logistics plays a crucial role in several contemporary developments in the retail industry, including, for instance, omni-channel fulfillment (Hübner et al., 2016), warehousing (Kembro et al., 2018), retail internationalization (Anwar, 2017; Haag & Sandberg, 2020), and reverse logistics practices (Pal, 2017).

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The rapid development in these and other areas means that retail companies need to rethink how to manage their logistics development processes. Instead of the traditional, top-down, lengthy analytical planning processes that are followed by linear phases of implementation and evaluation to find a new “optimal” set-up, companies need to shift to a “test-and-learn” approach (Sandberg & Abrahamsson, 2011) characterized by continuous testing and implementation of new logistics solutions, while swiftly phasing out others.

From a theoretical point of view, a crucial element for such practices is organizational learning. Organizational learning provides a basis for understanding change processes and is fundamental for sustaining a competitive advantage (Crossan et al., 1999; Panayides, 2007). From a resource and dynamic capability perspective (Teece, 2007), companies should possess an absorptive capacity, in which knowledge is systematically and purposefully acquired, assimilated, transformed, and subsequently exploited (Zahra & George, 2002). This much-debated capacity in strategic management theory has also increasingly been applied in a logistics and supply chain management setting, where a specific “logistics learning capability” has been proposed, defined as “the ability of a logistics organization to 1) effectively maintain and manage learning organization characteristics and 2) convert learning outcomes to new logistics management strategies, tactics, and operations in support of future development of other logistics capabilities” (Esper et al., 2007, p. 63). As emphasized in this definition, a logistics learning capability contains not only the conditions for learning, but also the subsequent practices for change that take place as a result of appropriate learning conditions (Esper et al., 2007).

A premise of this research is that a logistics learning capability based on an experimental “test-and-learn” approach holds the key to unlock logistics operations as a major competitive weapon in the current landscape of retailing. The purpose of this study is to empirically explore the characteristics of such a logistics learning capability, and to describe the corresponding logistics development practices. Based on an action research approach (Näslund et al., 2010) at the Swedish retailer H&M, we first provide empirical in-depth evidence of the four logistics learning components of culture, structure, relationships, and speed in a retail-context characterized in particular by its shift from linear to more experimental omni-channel development practices. We thereafter describe how five different logistics development practices at H&M feed into new strategies, tactics, and operations to support logistics development. The approach for this conversion is defined in this paper as “experimental logistics development.”

Our research complements other nascent empirically grounded research on logistics learning by taking a qualitative research approach, as most of the current research

is based on quantitative surveys (Saenz et al., 2014; Shang, 2009; Yang, 2016; Yuan et al., 2018). A qualitative case study approach here offers further in-depth exploration of the actual characteristics of a logistics learning capability. In particular, our research provides new knowledge regarding the nature of contemporary logistics learning components that are based on experiments and “test-and-learn” behavior rather than traditional, top-down planning processes. Furthermore, the development approach “experimental logistics development” is described and defined, which extends existing knowledge of the concept of logistics learning. Our study enables an exploration of these matters from several perspectives simultaneously. With few exceptions, for example, Yang (2016), such multidimensional research is scarce, as most other studies tend to focus on specific aspects related to logistics learning such as integration (Shang, 2009), trust and commitment (Yuan et al., 2018), or sustainability performance (Meinlschmidt et al., 2016).

H&M here represents an interesting, information-rich case. Like many other global fashion retailers (Anwar, 2017), H&M considers these operations to be critical for competitiveness, and related logistics development practices are therefore increasingly acknowledged. In this research, a large-scale development project aimed at product differentiation in the order and delivery processes of the company’s global supply chain forms the basis for the empirical data collection. The project is identified as crucial for H&M’s future omni-channel performance, and logistics learning capability plays a crucial role in the outcome of the project.

## 2 | ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN LOGISTICS

From a management research perspective, organizational learning typically occurs when the range of potential behaviors is expanded through the processing of information (Huber, 1991). It is hence a catalyst for strategic renewal (Crossan et al., 1999) and refers to creating as well as using knowledge to enhance competitiveness of an organization (Panayides, 2007). In a context that is undergoing rapid change, such as the retail industry as focused on in this research, this becomes particularly important.

Although there are a variety of parallel understandings, organizational learning is often understood as a process (Sinkula et al., 1997) that can be further divided into sub-processes, present at various hierarchical levels ranging from individuals to organizations (Crossan et al., 1999). In management research, which is mainly focused on learning at the organizational level, these processes have been further discussed as an absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), defined as “a set of organizational

routines and processes by which firms acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit knowledge to produce a dynamic organizational capability.” (Zahra & George, 2002, p. 186). The absorptive capacity hence incorporates a series of interrelated processes (capabilities) ranging from the identification of valuable external knowledge to be acquired, to the actual exploitation of knowledge so that either existing competencies can be enhanced, or new ones created (Zahra & George, 2002). In logistics research, the absorptive capacity concept has also increasingly been applied. For instance, based on Zahra and George’s (2002) processes, Alkalha et al. (2019) explored how a company’s absorptive capacity can improve supply chain quality, and Saenz et al. (2014) confirmed a positive relationship between absorptive capacity and supply chain innovation and efficiency.

To contextualize organizational learning in a logistics environment, and in line with absorptive capacity literature, Esper et al. (2007) conceptually elaborated a logistics learning capability. Similar to an absorptive capacity, a logistics learning capability is considered to be a source for a sustainable competitive advantage (Esper et al., 2007; Sandberg & Åman, 2010; Yang, 2016), and includes processes ranging from the maintenance and management of a learning organization to the conversion of acquired knowledge into new strategies, tactics, and operations. In addition to this processual perspective, Esper et al. (2007) also outlined the content of a logistics learning capability into the four thematic components of culture, structure, relationships, and speed. This provides a comprehensive overview of the many intertwined areas that together span logistics learning:

## 2.1 | Culture

For effective and efficient learning, a company’s learning orientation is an essential ingredient (Esper et al., 2007; Yuan et al., 2018). A learning orientation influences the propensity of an organization to create and use the knowledge needed for company development (Sinkula et al., 1997). A commitment to learning, that is, the willingness of an organization to learn, is an important factor here, as well as open-mindedness. Open-mindedness breaks down mental models and behavior that can give birth to new routines and ways of working, that is, “unlearning is at the heart of organizational change” (Sinkula et al., 1997, p. 309).

A shared vision is another essential feature of the culture component, as this provides the learning with direction and a joint platform for learning efforts among individuals as well as organizations. This also facilitates trust building among organizational members (Esper et al., 2007; Sinkula et al., 1997). To structure these features, Yang (2016) pro-

posed the OCEAN framework of open-mindedness (O), commitment to learning (C), system perspective (E), partner learning (A), and shared vision (N), which together reflects the cultural aspects of a company’s logistics learning capability.

A learning culture is an essential foundation for the other dimensions outlined below (Yuan et al., 2018). Grounded in a strong learning culture, the other categories suggested by Esper et al. (2007), that is, organizational structure, relationships, and the speed of learning, can be improved.

## 2.2 | Structure

In addition to a learning culture, the organizational structure and its formal procedures form an important basis for organizational learning (Esper et al., 2007). This structure can consciously be improved and adopted to facilitate learning. Sandberg and Åman (2010) demonstrated that an organizational structure allowing for parallel working routines and formalized knowledge articulation and codification procedures improves organizational learning. In general, an organizational structure that supports learning includes internal as well as external processes to obtain knowledge efficiently and effectively (Yuan et al., 2018). Such an “infrastructure” should typically facilitate various learning processes as discussed above, for example, intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalization (Crossan et al., 1999; Esper et al., 2007).

## 2.3 | Relationships

Organizational learning is increasingly considered a result of inter-organizational, often mutual, knowledge exchanges (Yang, 2016), collaborative information sharing activities (Yuan et al., 2018), and mutual training and support for the common purpose of improved performance in the supply chain (Kashyap & Lakhanpal, 2019). For instance, recent research has discussed the absorptive capacity at a knowledge receiving company in conjunction with the desorptive capacity at a knowledge submitting company (Meinlschmidt et al., 2016; Roldán Bravo et al., 2020). Learning and knowledge exchange becomes particularly valid in a logistics environment due to its boundary-spanning nature (Esper et al., 2007). For instance, the acquisition of knowledge from third-party logistics providers is essential in building a learning organization, (Yuan et al., 2018). Another opportunity for logistics learning through relationships comes via geographically concentrated logistics clusters, where companies and their service providers can share information and engage in collaborative activities (Abushaikh, 2018).

## 2.4 | Speed

As a fourth and final category, Esper et al. (2007) recognize a temporal component, that is, the speed with which an organization learns new things, as a vital aspect. A company's sustainable competitive advantage is often reliant upon the ability to learn faster than competitors (Yang, 2016). In essence, in terms of involved organizational learning processes, such speed means a rapid advancement from individuals' experiences and observations to implemented new organizational routines, where these have been interpreted and subsequently codified.

To facilitate speed in learning, experiential learning (Huber, 1991), including learning based on experiments, has been suggested as a promising approach. Operational activities, such as logistics practices in a supply chain, may here form the basis for experiential learning, in the form of trial-and-error practices (Sandberg & Åman, 2010). This is especially true for high-velocity contexts such as the fast fashion industry (Anwar, 2017), which is considered in this research.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

As a means to explore characteristics of the components of a logistics learning capability, and the logistics development practices included in such a capability, this research has been grounded in an action research approach. An action research approach aims at simultaneously taking an action, as well as creating knowledge about that action (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002), and is typically characterized by researchers being involved in and supporting practitioners' undertakings. It can be defined as "an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to address real organizational issues. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members, and in adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry." (Shani & Coughlan, 2019, p. 3)

Action research has increasingly been argued to be a relevant and suitable approach in logistics and supply chain management-related research. For instance, Touboullic and Walker (2016) described the value of action research in conjunction with current challenges related to advancing research on sustainable supply chain management. Maestrini et al. (2016) argued that action research was a valuable approach in understanding normally "messy" buyer-supplier relationships. In a similar vein, the action research conducted in this research provides increased

understanding of the multifaceted, complex concept of a logistics learning capability. It also offers a study over time of involved individuals, groups, and functions within the company, as well as in the supply chain, which enables an in-depth understanding of the logistics development practices targeted in this research. Hence, given the research purpose of this research, action research was deemed to be a suitable approach.

### 3.1 | Research organization

During a period of 18 months, two researchers followed a large-scale development project at the retailer, aimed at improving practices in conjunction with product differentiation in the order and delivery processes in the supply chain. A crucial issue in the beginning of research projects based on action research is to carefully frame the issue to be researched (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002). An overall purpose of the research was therefore agreed upon, which was to identify dynamic capabilities required for H&M's future logistics development, in particular in relation to its transformation towards omni-channel operations. A number of more specific objectives were also jointly formulated in the beginning of the project, with the purpose of this article corresponding to one of them. An H&M employee was also appointed as a main contact person for the researchers to enhance interaction and provide contacts within the H&M organization.

The particular project that provides the empirical foundation for this article was led by employees in the business development department, but participants in the project also cover employees from a variety of line functions in the company, including purchasing, logistics, and IT. In total, around 15 people were involved in the project. In this cross-functional project environment, the researchers participated in day-to-day working and information meetings (on average once every 3 weeks) and when possible, contributed with theoretical knowledge relevant to the project. In particular, supply chain design topics such as lean and agile supply chains, and product differentiation strategies were introduced by the researchers as a means to confirm the company's targeted goals with the development project. In addition, Esper et al. (2007) framework provided the practitioners with a new type of analytical tool for how to understand organizational learning in a logistics context.

### 3.2 | Research quality

As with all other research approaches, it is important to consider validity and reliability aspects in action research.



Although specific methodological challenges in action research may arise due to, for example, biased results in conjunction with the researchers' close interaction with the studied subject (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002), there are no specific quality criteria for action research. Rather, the researchers must be able to deal with any challenges that may arise in order to uphold research rigor. In this research, guided by Näslund et al. (2010) review of action research methodology, the efforts towards research rigor can be summarized into the following aspects.

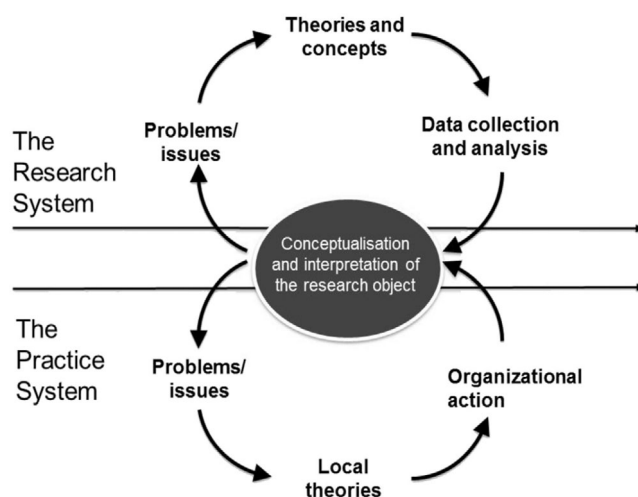
To enhance objectivity, a straightforward "chain of evidence" (Yin, 2003) between the empirical data and findings has been sought. A recurrent strategy has been to clearly document observations, interviews, and other interactions with practitioners by taking field notes, and guided by Esper et al. (2007) framework, to generate research results from these. All field notes were merged into a documentation protocol, hence covering all interaction and data relevant for the research. This "logbook" was structured in chronological order, with notes covering the content and outcomes of the meetings, as well as thoughts and reflections from the researchers. This documentation, in total about 75 pages, formed the basis for the analyses made in this research.

To ensure reliability, clear-cut research objectives and research questions were posed and communicated with H&M representatives. In addition, the role of the researchers in the development project was continually repeated to the participating practitioners. Internal validity was enhanced by triangulation. Both researchers observed and participated in several meetings, and different individuals at H&M were approached and asked similar questions. In cases of disagreements, these were utilized as a means for further investigation and understanding. In addition, the results of the study were also considered by several different individuals in the H&M organization.

External validity was recognized by understanding and emphasizing the context of the H&M project followed, in particular its attention to cross-functional operations and its orientation towards technology as a major driver for development. Utilization of the project findings was mainly achieved by discussing the relevance of the findings with H&M employees. In addition, a popular science article, written with an H&M employee, also served to pinpoint and accelerate the usefulness and relevance of the results for practitioners.

#### 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To structure the knowledge generation throughout the project, inspiration has been taken from an interactive



**EXHIBIT 1** Practice and research systems in interactive research. Based on Svensson et al. (2015), p. 352

research approach. Interactive research can be considered as a development of action research practices (Svensson et al., 2007; Svensson et al., 2015), mainly applied in a Scandinavian context (Ellström et al., 2020). In particular, an interactive research approach emphasizes and seeks to clarify the existence of, and interaction between, the two systems of research and practice (Exhibit 1). These two systems indicate that there is a difference in tasks as well as objectives between the practitioners and researchers (Ellström et al., 2020). As a means to not fall into a consultancy role, practical problem solving, or being "one of the gang" (Svensson et al., 2007), the focus for the researchers should be on opportunities for theory creation, whereas the practice system opts for practical problem solving (Ellström et al., 2020; Svensson et al., 2015).

The two systems feed each other in cycles through interaction in the form of "analytical seminars" that result in "cognitive input" (Svensson et al., 2015) which drives the systems forward into another cycle. The analytical seminars, that is, the conceptualization and interpretation point as indicated in Exhibit 1, are thus the major arena for encounters and dialogue between researchers and practitioners in the project, and can take many different forms, as long as they provide support for learning and cognitive input. For instance, workshops, seminars, and other discussions may work as analytical seminars, or "project reviews" in the very similar terminology used by Näslund et al. (2010). Typically, the interaction is guided by observations from the researchers and other theories, models, examples, and analogies (Svensson et al., 2007) that can serve as a platform for joint discussion and learning. The overall objective of analytical seminars is hence to co-produce knowledge that is valuable for both systems (Ellström et al., 2020).

EXHIBIT 2 The characteristics of H&amp;M's logistics learning components

Component	Characteristics
Culture	Top management attention to logistics as a source of competitive advantage.
	Entrepreneurial company values as guidance to logistics learning.
Structure	A global business development unit enables concentrated logistics learning efforts.
	Conduction of operational pilots and tests.
	Emphasis on coordination of logistics development projects.
Relationships	A business development organization works as a catalyst for development and knowledge exchange across functions.
	Relationships present at all hierarchical levels, internally and externally with other companies in the supply chain, for example, producers.
Speed	The existence of a broad palette of techniques for information gathering as well as distribution.
	Well-defined organizational roles and responsibilities that reduce waiting and response lead times.
	Solid basic knowledge level among involved employees in relevant areas.

#### 4.1 | The research cycles

As indicated in Exhibit 1, and highlighted by action research in general (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002; Näslund et al., 2010), the research process may be described in several research cycles. For this particular research, two major cycles can be identified, focused on the (1) empirical elaboration of logistics learning components and (2) the description of logistics development practices respectively.

#### 4.2 | The empirical elaboration of H&M's logistics learning components

In a first cycle, the nature of H&M's logistics learning capability was developed. Based on the comprehensive framework of learning components outlined by Esper et al. (2007), a rich, multidimensional understanding of the learning capability was targeted. Based on this deductive approach, following a pattern matching technique (Yin, 2003), the researchers continuously mapped their observations and iteratively developed and refined the characteristics of Esper et al. (2007) learning components. The data was collected mainly through observations during project meetings and informal interviews and discussions in conjunction with these. New data was continuously merged with existing data to condense the findings. In addition, two formal interviews were conducted with two employees, with an interview guide based on the four learning components. These interviews served to further strengthen the researchers' understanding of the learning components, and to verify, in a more systematic manner, characteristics in each of the four components. Thus, the two formal interviews served both as a further data collection method, but also as analytical seminars in which the researchers and practitioners together could reflect upon

and discuss the identified characteristics. Furthermore, at the end of the cycle, a table of the main findings was also presented and discussed with one of the project members to further verify and improve its content. A final version of the table is shown as Exhibit 2 in this article. At this stage the collaboration was also evaluated, and the next cycle was planned on the initiative from the researchers. In short, it was concluded that the identified component characteristics provided a solid understanding of the scope of logistics learning but did not offer any guidance on the actual development practices. A continuation into a second cycle targeting these practices was therefore suggested and agreed upon.

#### 4.3 | Description of the logistics development practices

A second cycle targeted the second part of the purpose, that is, H&M's logistics development practices. An inductive approach based on a concept coding technique (Miles et al., 2020) was taken, in which five different development practices were iteratively identified and thematically further developed. Concept coding is appropriate when the objective is to directly transcend particular observations and create more generalized codes (in this research, description of experimental logistics development practices). Description of these practices was formulated. As for the first cycle, observations at working meetings and informal interviews in conjunction to these meetings were the main source of information for the researchers. At another analytical seminar, the findings were also presented and discussed with a group of logistics managers at H&M. Based on comments from this meeting, it was then possible to further refine the findings, in particular the description of the practices. In addition, the researchers wrote

a popular science paper based on the findings, together with a senior H&M employee. This writing process allowed the results to be further scrutinized and developed jointly by the researchers and the practitioners, hence providing insights relevant both for researchers and practitioners.

## 5 | COMPONENTS OF H&M'S LOGISTICS LEARNING CAPABILITY

With annual sales of more than 20 billion USD, H&M is ranked as the second-largest fashion retailer in the world. Headquartered in Sweden, H&M is present in more than 70 countries, with more than 5000 retail stores. The group operates several fashion brands with different profiles, including COS, & Other Stories, Monki, Weekday, Afound, and ARKET, and orchestrates a complex worldwide logistics network with more than 80 warehouses globally. While design and retailing operations such as logistics, marketing, and sales are the major in-house functions, production is provided by 700 independent manufacturers in Asia, Europe, and Africa, operating in total more than 1600 first-tier factories. The production is supervised from 20 local production offices.

H&M has undergone substantial changes in its business in recent years, not the least in its logistics and supply chain management practices. In particular, the transformation from physical stores as main sales channel to an omni-channel offering has played a major role in these changes. To successfully carry out this transformation, logistics performance throughout the entire supply chain is acknowledged as being a critical factor. H&M therefore runs a variety of logistics-related development projects aimed at ensuring the company's long-term performance with respect to a sustainable customer offering in an omni-channel environment. One of these projects, which has been followed in this research, concerns improved product differentiation in the order and delivery processes in H&M's supply chain.

Overall, the project aims to improve the availability of products characterized by their stable demand across seasons and long lifecycles. Such "running items" should typically be treated with a long planning horizon, applying simple, standardized, and automated order and delivery procedures that can easily be controlled and followed up. To achieve this, the project has launched a series of improvement initiatives with respect to the treatment of these products throughout the global supply chain. For instance, improving the transparency of required demand towards suppliers beyond an individual season is targeted here as well as the development and implementation of an automated ordering tool based on individual sizes of an article. In addition, changes in product labels that facili-

tate storage of the products over seasons are also targeted, as well as improved forecast methods in which individual sizes rather than articles are emphasized.

Altogether, based on the framework of the four learning components proposed by Esper et al. (2007), these improvement efforts provide a rich empirical context in which characteristics of the case company's logistics learning capability have been identified (Exhibit 2).

### 5.1 | Entrepreneurial rather than efficiency-oriented culture

In recent years a nascent awareness of logistics' strategic relevance in overall business development has been acknowledged at H&M. Ultimately, a sustainable competitive advantage based on logistics operations is at stake here. In line with the overall retail industry's development into, for example, omni-channel practices and delivery services, customer satisfaction has increasingly become a guiding factor for logistics development efforts. Besides the traditional focus on cost reduction and efficient operations, new business opportunities related to the marketplace and customer value are particularly emphasized at H&M. The studied product differentiation project focused on in this research constitutes an example of this, as its overall goal is directly linked to improved product availability and customer satisfaction.

The growing relevance of logistics as a source of competitive advantage is especially reflected in top management's growing attention towards logistics development. This means that typical organizational learning elements such as commitment towards learning, open-mindedness, and a shared vision towards logistics (Esper et al., 2007; Sinkula et al., 1997) are all strengthened. These elements are also exhibited in the structural component (see below), where they are turned into organizational practices. An example of this is systems thinking as part of the learning culture, which is manifested, for instance, in H&M's efforts towards coordination of different development projects.

At a more general level, company values, often including an entrepreneurial spirit in which curiosity and willingness to try new things are present, drives organizational learning in H&M. In a logistics context, typical values mentioned are simplicity, cost consciousness, belief in people, continuous improvement, high ambitions, and solution orientation. Values more directed towards efficient and effective operations are also linked to the overall goals such as customer satisfaction. Cost efficiencies and environmental performance (e.g., less emissions from transports) are often considered basic requirements, whereas customer satisfaction is what really drives improvement efforts in the company. In the product differentiation

project, its overall goal is defined as: “Running item products should be available to the customer at all times all year around, in all sizes, in ‘their’ store and online - without unwanted stock.”

## 5.2 | A cross-functional structure coordinating logistics development projects globally

Although logistics learning occurs in a variety of company functions, at different organizational levels, a business development unit has the important role of logistics learning and development in H&M. To ensure an organizational infrastructure that supports logistics learning, the business development unit, with its organizational emphasis on formal development projects, constitutes a major basis for learning. Cross-functional structures here foster a wider scope of logistics development, where logistics expertise becomes part of larger business objectives that go beyond cost cutting and inventory reduction. Of particular importance is the strong relationship between the logistics and IT capabilities. As emphasized by several employees, logistics development is increasingly technology-driven and there is a need for further alignment between logistics and IT competencies. To further improve the utilization of new technology in the company’s logistics development efforts, the development resources of logistics and IT have recently been restructured into a new organizational unit.

Another key aspect of logistics learning in the structural component is top management’s formal coordination between, as well as within, projects. To ensure progress and experiences across projects, top management formally manages the palette of projects and appoints suitable resources and employees to participate in different projects (to facilitate operational coordination among projects). Recently, in a major organizational change, employees with in-depth knowledge in certain areas were mapped and titled “Business Experts.” This can be seen as an attempt to further increase the visibility of knowledge and competencies among employees. This is required for efficient knowledge supply into the development projects and by extension the logistics learning of the organization. In addition, goal alignments and competing incentives are continuously reviewed and managed by top management. Also, within projects, different working groups of employees are made responsible for different parts and are coordinated by the project leader.

For general guidance, the overall company strategy is formulated into a roadmap that sets the long-term priorities also for the logistics development projects. This in turn directly affects the content of the logistics learn-

ing. For instance, in line with an overall company priority towards omni-channel business the logistics learning regarding omni-channel matters has been intensified in recent years.

## 5.3 | Relationships present at all hierarchical levels, internally and externally

As noted by Anwar (2017) in a study of H&M’s competitors Zara and Uniqlo, a major challenge for the performance of global fashion players is the complex, often fragmented supplier networks. Intra- as well as inter-organizational relationship management is therefore an essential ingredient for H&M’s logistics learning capability. In particular, relationship management in the studied project is to a large extent built upon the relationship between the business development unit, the buying office situated in Sweden, and the production office in Asia. The latter has direct lines of communication with the external supplier network. At the very center of logistics learning stands the close exchange of knowledge, insights, and ideas between these organizational entities where logistics is a link between business and operations.

The business development function here works as a catalyst for development and change, facilitating its own as well as the other functions’ logistics learning processes. Meanwhile, the business development function is dependent upon the other functions to handle logistics development. For instance, vital insights are gained from the buying office in the form of customer experiences and business trends and legal requirements. In a similar manner, the production function, mainly represented by the purchasing offices in Asia and their direct contact with external production units and suppliers, constitutes a platform where most of the logistics operations are conducted. Knowledge exchange with the production function is hence essential for the understanding of what is possible and viable to achieve and change in the logistics operations.

To embrace organizational learning, relationships and communication are present at all hierarchical levels in the company. Alignment and communication at top management level are complemented with formal as well as informal contacts and personal linkages at a more operational level. Often, as described above in the structural component, these exchanges are centered around operational pilots, which typically foster intense collaboration and communication among involved functions. Communication and mutual learning at this “grassroots level” are generally stressed as important occasions for learning and sharing experiences within the company.



## 5.4 | Well-defined organizational roles to enhance speed in the change process

The different learning processes, for instance, theoretically described as ranging from individuals' intuiting to an organization's institutionalization (Crossan et al., 1999), must be conducted at a fast pace. In H&M's differentiation project, a variety of processes and techniques are utilized to ensure rapid and efficient information gathering (e.g., before launching a pilot) as well as information distribution (e.g., to implement experiences from a pilot through codification). These processes typically contain a plethora of different information channels, ranging from simple emails and telephone calls to formal instruction videos and training activities.

To ensure the use of the right information and knowledge exchange channels, the design of the formal business development unit is considered decisive. The more clearly defined the roles and responsibilities regarding logistics development and implementation are, the more the speed can be enhanced. The development unit typically acts as the engine for rapid change and implementation of new practices. Clarification of roles and responsibilities is considered crucial in this context to reduce waiting and response lead-times, as well as administration work.

Another decisive factor for rapid learning is the level of basic knowledge among involved employees in different functions. Overall, as stated by one of the H&M managers, the pace of learning can be enhanced when new knowledge can be built upon an existing solid knowledge base. For instance, operational hands-on knowledge about how current order processes work is essential for an understanding and interpretation of other involved functions' perspectives.

In summary, based on the framework on logistics learning capability from Esper et al. (2007), we have observed the following characteristics of a more experimental logistics development approach in retailing:

- In omni-channel settings an entrepreneurial culture with a focus on customer experiences is more important than the traditional cost efficiency-oriented development culture.
- Cross-functional structures and globally coordinated logistics projects promote a wider scope of logistics development, where logistics expertise becomes part of larger business objectives that go beyond cost cutting and inventory reduction.
- Relationships, communication, and learning internally as well as externally in the supply chain is essential for understanding and exploring how logistics operations can support and be a part of business development.

- Basic logistics knowledge broadly in the organization together with clearly defined roles and responsibilities are essential to enhance speed in logistics development.

## 6 | H&M'S LOGISTICS DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

The previous section, organized around the four components of culture, structure, relationships, and speed (Esper et al., 2007), gives a comprehensive overview of H&M's logistics learning capability, supporting new logistics strategies, tactics, and operations. Based on this learning capability, we have in the second research cycle, described H&M's five experimental logistics development practices (in contrast to traditional, linear development practices) as follows:

- Customer-oriented "test-and-learn" practices (instead of cost-oriented rationalization and restructuring)
- Active top management attention and support (instead of passive delegation to logistics department based on investment claims)
- Systematic and fast development and implementation (instead of analysis followed by a process-oriented implementation program)
- Cross-functional integration and attention of internal and external actors across the supply chain (instead of a development of cost-efficient practices within the logistics function only)
- Test and apply new technologies in pilots with real customer orders (instead of a program-oriented implementation of IT/IS-support for logistics)

### 6.1 | Customer-oriented "test-and-learn" practices

A key observation at H&M, and a premise for experimental logistics development as defined above, is that in a rapidly changing and dynamic retail environment, the traditional, lengthy desktop analyses that are followed by formal decisions and large implementation projects have become obsolete. Instead, the development practices observed in H&M follow a "test-and-learn" behavior, infused with a series of small-scaled tests and pilots. These are supported by an entrepreneurial culture in the company, guided by principles such as open-mindedness and willingness to learn new things as emphasized in Esper et al. (2007) cultural learning component. In accordance with an experiential learning approach (Huber, 1991), experiences from the trials form the basis for learning and for new development and change initiatives in an ongoing learning spiral.

Such a spiral typically includes four elements (Kolb, 1994): (1) exposure to a concrete experience, (2) reflection on that experience, (3) generalization of the experience and formation of concepts, and (4) application of these concepts to the concrete experience. As observed at H&M, the “test-and-learn” practices are guided mainly by customer satisfaction and experience, rather than a traditional logistics efficiency approach based on cost savings.

## 6.2 | Active top management attention and support

Top management support goes beyond a passive recognition of logistics as an important function. High-level management in H&M takes part in logistics development practices by supporting logistics change processes and aligns them to the business development agenda. This is important for the creation of a wider understanding in the organization of the strategic utility of a proactive and customer-oriented logistics development. A project portfolio and budget management are here essential tools. This contrasts with the traditional model, where logistics investments and projects are initiated by the logistics department in specific investment claims (Sandberg & Abrahamsson, 2010).

## 6.3 | Systematic and fast development and implementation

Another key feature of H&M’s logistics development practices is the reliance on systematic and fast development and implementation of new logistics practices. In line with a “test-and-learn” behavior, H&M does not seek an optimal, perfect logistics solution that in practice no longer exists, but rather an acceptable solution, while systems and activities are iteratively and continuously adapted to new requirements and conditions. Part of this is also the existence of parallel logistics practices that allow for learning from a wider range of existing logistics operations. However, even though the continuous development of H&M’s logistics practices can be described as experimental, individual pilots and tests are conducted in a systematic way, that is, they are organized, supervised, and carefully followed up. Besides their systematic organization and follow up, the actual speed of the tests, from their initiation to their evaluation, is another essential ingredient and yardstick for H&M’s ability to adapt towards new requirements and demands. Overall, speed facilitates the continuous upgrading of the logistics practices, and warrants the relevance of H&M’s existing logistics practices (Esper et al., 2007).

## 6.4 | Cross-functional integration and attention of internal and external actors across the supply chain

The logistics development practices of H&M are also characterized by cross-functional integration, as often emphasized in supply chain management literature (Abrahamsson et al., 2015; Mentzer et al., 2001). Related to Esper et al. (2007) framework, this integration constitutes an essential part of the relationship component of logistics learning. The traditional focus on the creation of cost-efficient practices within the logistics function has, in H&M, been accompanied by an emphasis on supply chain management practices where supply chain performance, including multiple company functions, overrules the performance of the logistics function. This cross-functional attention does not imply investments in new resources, but rather a combination of existing resources that are available in the supply chain in new ways. In particular, logistics development practices at H&M are based on a combination of operational logistics resources, supply-oriented resources related to purchasing and customer-oriented resources related to sales and marketing. As a result, logistics development activities are typically characterized as bidirectional, in which the logistics function collaborates with other functions to jointly conduct development projects. Overall, this collaboration means that logistics development does not become an isolated matter for the logistics function, but also an interest for other company functions.

## 6.5 | Test and apply new technologies in pilots with real customer orders

New technologies provide new opportunities. Development efforts in the supply chain have previously been expensive in terms of the time and resources involved. With new technologies available, it is now possible to conduct development in a cost-efficient manner, which is accelerating innovations in many fields, including logistics and supply chain management (Malekifar et al., 2014; Pantano et al., 2018). Current global and complex logistics operations at H&M are indeed information-intensive, which means that the IT/IS-technology development provides new opportunities for logistics development practices.

For most development projects, including the product differentiation project focused on in this research, pilots to gather experiences play a major role in the logistics development at H&M. These pilots are conducted mainly by the line organization in charge of the ongoing logistics operations. Examples of pilots in the product

differentiation project are the construction of a new automated size tool used in the ordering processes, and a new digitalized planning process for improved transparency between the buying and production units of the company. Experiences from these pilots constitute an important input for the company's logistics learning and future development projects.

As a consequence, it is crucial for H&M to have a logistics development in which new technologies can be tested in a real setting. For instance, artificial intelligence (AI) utilizing big data on logistics operations and customer behavior enables new logistics practices such as product and market differentiation. New data gathering technologies, such as Internet of Things devices, here play an important role in understanding how the logistics system works. As for the "test-and-learn" practices, the utilization of these new technologies is typically guided by a strong cultural component, in which new technology naturally becomes part of new logistics solutions.

## 6.6 | Experimental logistics development defined

Based on the above described five practices, we define H&M's experimental logistics development approach as: *A customer-oriented test-and-learn approach, financed and supported by top management, aiming at fast and systematic development and implementation of new logistics practices across functions, where existing physical logistics resources are boosted by new technologies.*

## 7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Logistics as a profession and in particular its development practices are currently undergoing a major change towards experimental "test-and-learn" procedures. A logistics learning capability, including cultural, structural, relational, and temporal components as outlined in this research, is vital for these new development practices. Based on empirical data from H&M (see Exhibit 2), this research reveals a logistics learning capability to be a multifaceted and boundary-spanning construct, including engagement at an individual as well as organizational level, cultural values as well as activities, and company- as well as supply chain-wide considerations. In particular, the findings hint at logistics learning as a matter that goes far beyond the interests of the traditional logistics scope, such as warehouse management and transportation. Rather, a logistics learning capability embraces top management involvement and company-wide—or even supply chain-wide—perspectives on customer service and performance.

This indicates the complexity of a logistics learning capability and the challenge in converting learning outcomes into new logistics management practices.

At the very center of this conversion is the emphasis on experiments in the form of rapid pilot studies and tests with short feedback loops, in contrast to traditional, top-down, lengthy analytical planning processes that are followed by linear phases of implementation and evaluation. As a means to improve our knowledge about this approach, we have in this research provided a definition of experimental logistics development and outlined the characteristics of its practices.

The notion of experimental practices is not an isolated phenomenon in a logistics and supply chain context but follow a trend towards more rapid and dynamic development processes. For instance, in a digital context in the software industry, Thomke (2020) discussed the concept of experimentation by changing the web-based interface with online customers. Thomke (2020) suggested that in order to successfully innovate, companies need to make experimentation an integrated part of their daily R&D work, where employees' curiosity is nurtured, and where people can conduct and commission tests. One element of this is a new model of leadership, building on experimentation culture. This includes a change from a conservative focus overemphasizing the importance of successful experiments, to a culture that allows many experiments in parallel, of which only a few will generate positive results. Although Thomke's (2020) research is based on another context, our findings indicate that this line of thinking is valid also in the "test-and-learn" practices outlined in this research.

### 7.1 | Theoretical implications

From a theoretical point of view, the paper makes two contributions with respect to scientific utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Firstly, empirical data from a vibrant retail environment has provided in-depth knowledge and understanding of contemporary logistics learning components characterized by experiments and "test-and-learn" behavior. In addition, the starting point in Esper et al. (2007) framework enables a comprehensive overview of several dimensions involved in logistics learning simultaneously, organized into the components of culture, structure, relationships, and speed. As emphasized in the introduction, this research thus complements previous quantitative research studies focused on particular elements of logistics learning. As such, our findings improve conceptual rigor regarding the construct of logistics learning capability, but also possibilities for future operationalization and testing of its content (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Secondly, our findings provide empirical insights into the actual logistics development practices that convert logistics learning into new strategies, tactics, and operations (Esper et al., 2007). The recognition of experimental logistics development practices is close to the concept of experiential learning in organizational learning theory, (Huber, 1991). In the context of logistics and supply chain management, current research on experiential learning has so far been geared towards computer simulation gaming of business processes (Angolia & Pagliari, 2018; Bodner et al., 2013; Hofstede, 2006). In contrast, this research outlines how experiential learning is systematically and consciously gained by conducting new physical activities and processes in a supply chain environment. By doing this, the research also constitutes a continuation of, and provides further insights into, previous studies on retail company practices such as Anwar's (2017) study on the global fashion companies Zara and Uniqlo or Sorkun et al.'s (2020) study on the role of flexibility and service quality for enhanced customer satisfaction. Whereas these studies concluded the importance of logistics and supply chain practices in the development towards omni-channels, this study provides further details on how to embrace this development.

## 7.2 | Managerial implications

The research findings of this study also contribute in terms of practical utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011) by providing insights into how to organize and utilize a logistics learning capability in practice. The findings emphasize a project management leadership style that is based on the ability to define, manage, evaluate, and terminate experiments in the physical flow of goods. In modern retail companies, this is a key factor for high performing organizations, embracing aspects such as managerial openness towards new actions, an emphasis on long-term objectives, and continuous improvement and renewal of processes and activities (de Waal, 2012). In light of the findings from this study, this particularly requires managerial attention to the following:

- A continuous mapping and overview of the existing resource base in terms of physical logistics resources, technology, and knowledge—internally and among partners in the supply chain
- “Test-and-learn” capabilities, including new technologies, financed, and supported by top management
- Implementation of required pilots aimed at improving customer satisfaction, as well as their evaluation and decision-making regarding either upscaling and align-

ment to current supply chain operations or their termination and closure

- Issues regarding project organization, such as defining forums that facilitate coordination and knowledge transfer across projects

Another managerial implication of this research is the increasingly important role of technology in logistics development practices. For instance, the emergence of real-time supply chain visibility technologies provides immense new opportunities to exploit this information for the purposes of logistics development (Oliveira & Handfield, 2019). As a result, competencies related to technology are becoming increasingly important for the future development of operations in the physical supply chain. At H&M, this development was recently manifested when supply chain and IT development functions were merged into a new development unit, enabling, for instance, increased use of AI and machine learning in a supply chain context.

The focus on technology may also foster even more attention towards experimental practices in the future. Technology-driven development practices such as those in the software industry (Thomke, 2020) or in sharing economy-based transportation companies such as Uber (Anwar, 2018) may be further diffused to logistics development practices. To embrace this development, managers need to increase their attention towards new technology, both as an enabler of improved physical flows, but also from the perspective of new development practices.

## 7.3 | Limitations and future research

The findings outlined in this research are based on observations from a single case study, characterized by its size and global presence and fast fashion-oriented operations. Nevertheless, many of the findings are also relevant for other retail companies, facing rapidly changing customer demands with respect to logistics services and the transition towards omni-channel retailing. In particular, the findings feed into three major suggestions for future research. Firstly, as argued above, the findings of this research provide an operationalization of the logistics learning components. As a step towards further clarification of these components, item development and quantitative studies that capture these components would be a very valuable next step. Such studies could enable insights and comparison of the logistics learning components in different retail sectors, as well as among different types of companies along the supply chain, for example, between retailers, manufacturers, and suppliers. Secondly, the findings of this research have been concerned with the actual content



of the logistics learning components and the description of experimental logistics development practices. Future research should focus on the managerial attention necessary for logistics learning. Top management attention and support is identified as an important feature in our experimental logistics development practices, but how this support should be organized remains to be further scrutinized. For instance, dynamic managerial capabilities as outlined in strategic management research (Adner & Helfat, 2003) may offer a viable theoretical lens. Another future research theme might target the actual outcome of a logistics learning capability. As outlined in the introduction, a consciously developed and maintained logistics learning capability may be the source of a sustainable competitive advantage. However, in line with dynamic capabilities theory, investing in a logistics learning capability may not always be advantageous (Winter, 2003). The cost of deliberately creating and maintaining a logistics learning capability should be compared against other alternatives for development, such as ad hoc problem-solving, as suggested by Winter (2003).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS


Erik Sandberg: Conceptualization (equal); Data curation; Formal Analysis; Funding acquisition (lead); Investigation; Methodology (lead); Validation; Writing – original draft preparation (lead); Writing – review and editing (equal). Mats Abrahamsson: Conceptualization (equal); Funding acquisition (supporting); Methodology (supporting); Writing – original draft preparation (supporting); Writing – review and editing (equal).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

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