

DRAFT PAPER:

**HOW DO SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED CROSS-BORDER ENTREPRISES LEARN
AND INNOVATE IN THE DUTCH-GERMAN BORDERLAND?**

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Abstract

Purpose: Organisations doing business across national borders face new and more barriers, such as differences in culture, language, legislation and infrastructure. Since learning organisations and their professionals are more adaptive to the continuously changing and complex workplace environment, they were also expected to cope better with cross-border business. However, there is hardly any research on how SMEs or other organisations develop into learning organisations in a cross-border context. This research aims to gain insight into how small and medium cross-border enterprises learn and innovate.

Design: A cross-sectional interview study was applied, in which data was collected through 11 qualitative interviews with entrepreneurs and boundary spanners from 9 different organisations (SMEs) with experience in cross-border business (Dutch-German borderland).

Findings: The findings illustrate what SMEs doing business across-borders do to develop into learning organisations. However, these intentions and activities seem to occur implicitly and unconsciously. Besides, they proposition themselves implicitly as a cross-border business. Maybe due to the fact that those entrepreneurs that are close to the border do not see the national border as a border nor as a barrier.

SMEs involved in cross-border business in the region of Rhine-Meuse-North region learn at the different levels of a learning organisation, but all in a different manner. They do not learn at every level and characteristic of a learning organisation, which results in a lack of alignment in learning on the individual, team, and organisational level. In that view, they do not differ from SMEs in general. Learning thus does not seem to be an additional way for cross-border organisations to deal with the complexities of cross-border business.

Originality: There is much research on learning organisations, but not so much in the context of cross-border entrepreneurship, and not yet as much from a qualitative research perspective.

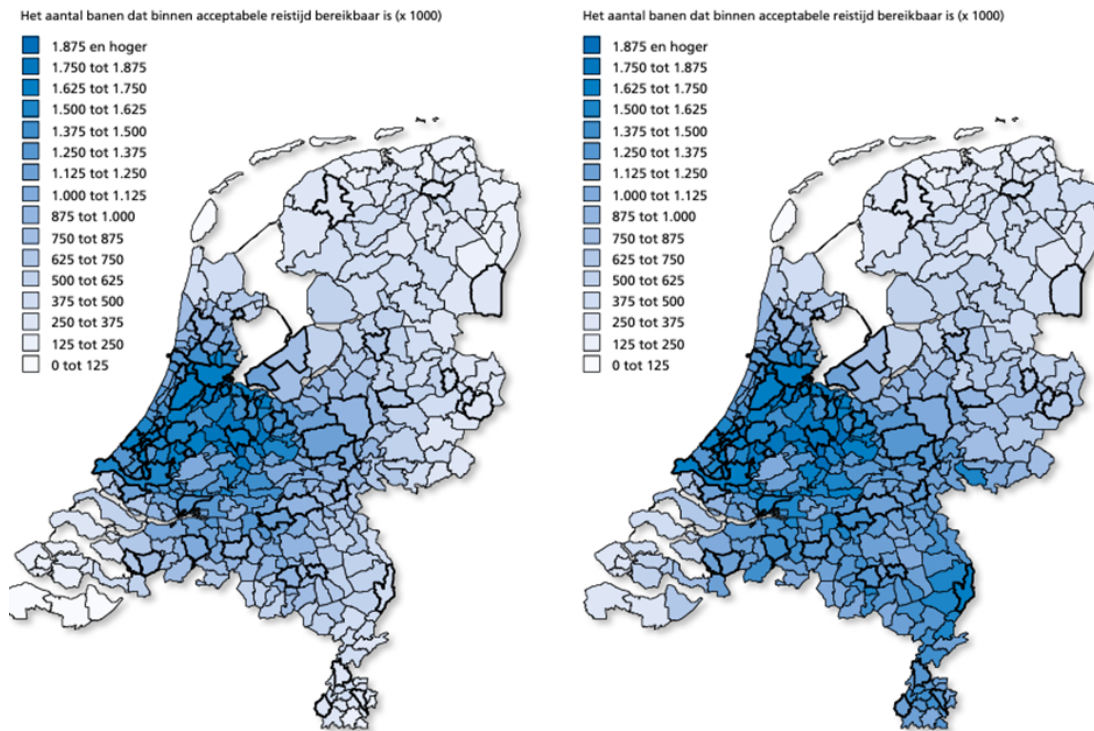
Keywords: Cross-border Business Development, Dutch-German borderland, SME, Learning organisation.

Introduction

In Europe, several border regions are fairly stable and integrated due to the Schengen Agreement, such as the Dutch-German border region. Although cross-border engagement opportunities for SMEs are expected to be more favourable in open border regions (Makkonen & Leick, 2019), entrepreneurs still face challenges related to bureaucracy and numerous regulations. This dampens the enthusiasm of enterprising business leaders to engage across the border. Still, a reasonable number of SMEs search for business opportunities across the border in the Dutch-German border region, thereby contributing to the borderscaping process. Of course, multiple actors create dynamics in the borderland. Hence, the Dutch-German border serves as a good example of an ‘integrated borderland’ (Pijnenburg, 2019; Strüver, 2004). Especially for the Dutch province of Limburg, it is essential to search for opportunities across the border since it has more international borders than borders with the Netherlands itself (Grenspost-Düsseldorf, 2023). On top of that, due to the high population density of the adjacent metropolitan region, the Rhine-Ruhr area in Germany, many opportunities are present in Limburg compared to the rest of the Netherlands. This is demonstrated in Figure 1, which shows the large number of job opportunities present in Limburg if borders did not exist. This highlights the potential for cross-border development in Limburg, specifically the region Rhine-Meuse-North, and the opportunities this presents for SMEs in the region.

In the Rhine-Meuse-North border region, doing business across the border is booming. This is evidenced, for example, by the share of start-up exporters to Germany, which in 2018 was one of the highest in the country (CBS, 2020). These exports mainly occur within the wholesale and retail trade, industry and business services sectors and, to a slightly lesser extent, in the transport, hospitality and information sectors. Also, the number of cross-border commuters between the Netherlands and Germany is the highest in the euregion Rhine-Meuse-North in the whole of the Netherlands (CBS report GEA, 2017). Here, over 5 per cent of workers were from Germany in 2021. This is significantly higher than the national average of 0.5 per cent.

Figure 1: On the left: the accessibility of jobs without crossing borders. On the right: the accessibility of jobs with crossing borders. Source: (Marlet et al., 2019)



For entrepreneurs and employees, doing and working across the border means collaborating with organisations or colleagues from Germany to the Netherlands and vice versa. This presents opportunities (e.g. employment, new markets) but also challenges, such as dealing with the German (or Dutch) language and culture, national and regional government policies, laws, and regulations that are different on both sides of the border. To deal with these challenges, it is important for companies to have a learning culture in which employees are encouraged to learn with and from each other despite language barriers or other (cultural) differences. By promoting a culture of learning, collaboration, and innovation, they can ensure that they remain competitive and successful (as entrepreneurs) in the future. Thus, learning organisations can adapt relatively quickly to external influences or a new environment with new conditions, as with cross-border working (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). On this basis, we presumed that entrepreneurs in the euregion Rhine-Meuse-North, which explore the possibilities of doing cross-border business, would be significantly developed as learning organisations, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, our aimed to explore how small and medium-sized cross-border enterprises learn and innovate in the Dutch-German borderland.

By addressing the internationalisation and innovation process of SMEs in the Dutch-German border region, this study contributes both to SME internationalisation research (through the focus on the border region), the border region literature (by focusing on an advanced border region), and the literature about learning organisation due to our specific focus on cross-border organisations. Choosing the Rhine-Meuse-North region offers insights and lessons that can serve as learnings for other cross-border regions to evaluate themselves against.

Theoretical framework

Hence, for our study, it is important to define international business and entrepreneurship before further zooming into cross-border business and entrepreneurship. Secondly, we explain entrepreneurship strategies as effectuation and causation, and thirdly, more insight is provided into the theory of learning organisations.

International business and entrepreneurship in SMEs

The internationalisation of SMEs is a topic that is receiving increasing scholarly attention (Steinhäuser et al., 2020). According to the European-Commission (2014), internationalisation involves "all activities that put SMEs into a meaningful business relationship with a foreign partner." Dutot et al. (2014, p. 674) describe internationalisation as "the outward movement of a firm's operations and the process of mobilization, accumulation, and development of a specific set of resources to achieve greater performance". However, since our research is interested in internationalisation realized by entrepreneurs, the definition of international entrepreneurship is more aligned with the understanding of internationalisation in this study. International entrepreneurship is defined by Ruzzier et al. (2006, p. 6) as a "combination of innovative, risk-seeking behaviour that crosses national borders and is intended to create value in organisation". Later on, Sarasvathy et al. (2014, p. 75) defined international entrepreneurship as "the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities—across national borders—to create future goods and services'. Hence, this study fosters the latter definition, one can not compare it one-to-one with cross-border business. Therefore we briefly describe some literature on the role of borders in entrepreneurship and then delve into the topic of entrepreneurship in border regions.

Cross-border business and entrepreneurship in SMEs

The border presents both opportunities and challenges, and being located in a border region comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Although borders play a significant role in entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurship literature rarely focuses on international borders and nearby border regions. These areas are often perceived as delineating political, social, economic and cultural differences that can restrict the movement of capital, people, trade, services, and information. As a result, borders have typically been seen as obstacles to accessing international networks and foreign markets, which are essential for the growth of entrepreneurship and SMEs (Makkonen & Leick, 2019). However, borders can also be viewed as resources for SMEs. Sohn (2014) argues that cross-border integration occurs not just through debordering but because opening borders creates opportunities for local and regional actors to exploit the cross-border context.

Despite the regional significance, the literature indicates that cross-border entrepreneurship remains underdeveloped in border regions. Hassink et al. (1995) observed three decades ago that firms in these areas often contend with incomplete markets due to their hinterlands spanning national borders. Their research in the euregion Rhine-Meuse revealed that many enterprises predominantly focus on national markets. Besides, Koschatzky (2000) highlighted that SMEs in border regions frequently encounter difficulties in navigating institutional structures, bureaucratic processes, and cultural differences across borders, hindering their ability to capitalize on cross-border cooperation opportunities. On the contrary, Smallbone and Welter (2012) encapsulate the view of borders as a resource for entrepreneurship by stating that cross-border entrepreneurship offers opportunities to access new markets, sources of supply, capital, technology, know-how, and networks. In our study, the latter definition was applied in selecting the participating cross-border SMEs.

However, it is important to note that proximity, the location of SMEs to the border, can play a larger role in euregional entrepreneurship compared to international entrepreneurship. Recent literature on cross-border regional innovation systems (Lundquist & Trippl, 2013; Makkonen & Rohde, 2016) suggests that cross-border differences ('related variety') are a locational benefit. Related variety means that if the sides of the border are too similar, there is little to learn, and if they are too different, there are no synergy gains (Makkonen & Rohde, 2016). Good levels of related variety drive economic growth and innovation in cross-border regions (Lundquist & Trippl, 2013). By sharing knowledge, SMEs can foster cross-border cooperation, laying the foundations for innovation and economic growth (Makkonen & Williams, 2017). Therefore, for

SMEs, participating in cross-border cooperation supports the creation of firm-level competitive advantages (Makkonen & Leick, 2019).

This also counts for the region euregion Maas-Rhine-North. This region is a more integrated borderland, where entrepreneurs operate in the near proximity of Germany or The Netherlands, and the other cultures seem familiar. This sometimes leads to overconfidence, naivety, and start off with cross-border business without a decent preparation. This pattern can be explained by the four stages of learning (skill competence), as shown by Broadwell (1969). The four stages of competence suggest that individuals are initially unaware of how little they know or unconscious of their incompetence. As they recognize their incompetence, they consciously acquire a skill (cross-border entrepreneurship) and then consciously use it. From a cultural perspective, it seems, on the one hand that Dutch entrepreneurs are more likely to start cross-border based on an opportunity instead of a fixed plan. On the other hand, it is recognized in German culture that they work more according to a well-thought-out plan. Therefore, briefly introducing the entrepreneurs' strategies of effectuation and causation is relevant.

Effectuation and causation

Entrepreneurs employ various behavioural logics in the venture creation process, including effectuation and causation. Where causation rests on a logic of prediction, effectuation rests on the logic of control. Effectuation has been defined as a theoretical framework that explains how entrepreneurs use resources they control along with commitments and constraints from chosen stakeholders to develop new creations like ventures, products, (international) opportunities, and markets (Sarasvathy et al., 2014). Sarasvathy (2001) initiated a strand of research aiming to analyze and describe entrepreneurial behaviour, drawing on an alternative perspective to the traditional view of entrepreneurial decision-making based on rational reasoning (causation). In the attempt to model a representation of the different steps for entrepreneurial decision-making, Sarasvathy (2001) proposes the effectuation theory, which describes how the entrepreneur draws on their surroundings to reach an identified objective instead of creating objectives based on analysis of market information. Overall, her work emphasizes how expert entrepreneurs will follow a planned and predictive decision-making process less and instead act and base their decisions on available means, knowledge, and networks in their surrounding environment (Kalinic et al., 2014). So, effectuation represents a significant change in how we understand entrepreneurial behaviour and decision-making when launching new businesses or navigating

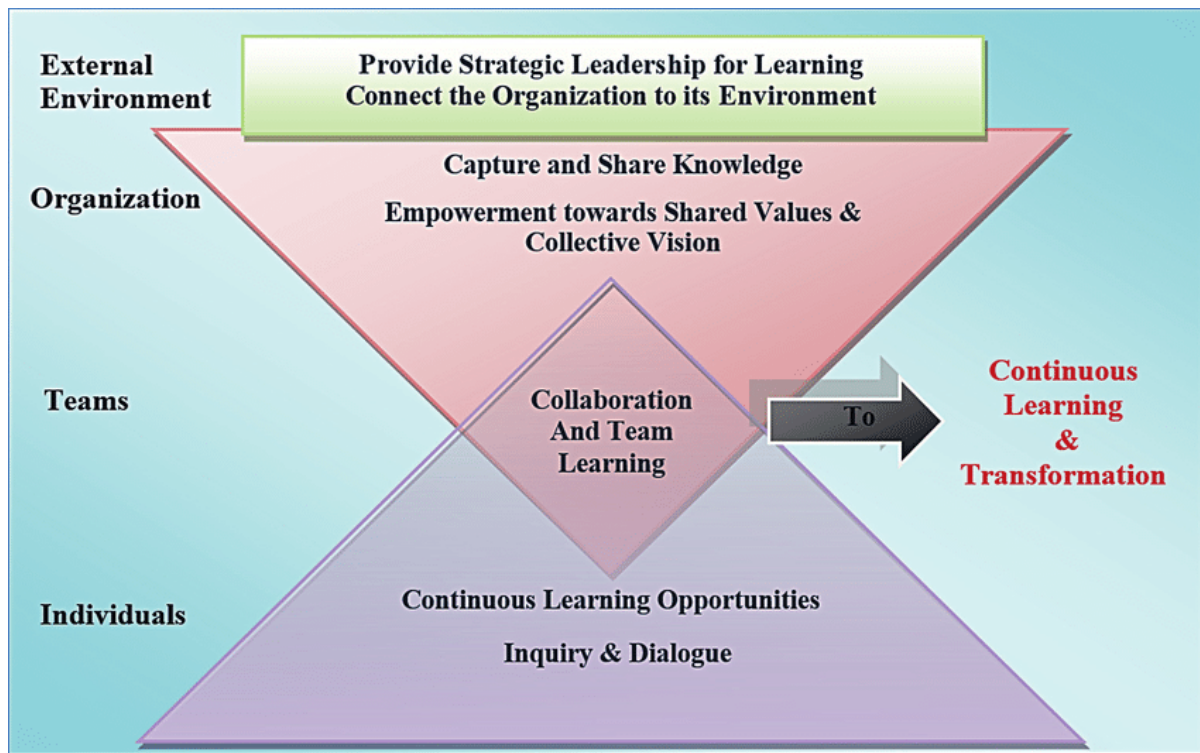
high uncertainty. Internationalisation is recognized as one of the primary areas of effectuation research (Laine & Galkina, 2016). The rationale for integrating the effectuation approach into international (cross-border) entrepreneurship research lies in the similarities between entrepreneurial processes and those involved in internationalisation; both operate amidst Knightian uncertainty, goal ambiguity, and environmental unpredictability (Schweizer et al., 2010). In situations of uncertainty, proactive individuals often collaborate to create new opportunities by leveraging available resources to pursue innovative goals (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Learning organisations

In addition to the border challenges, more complexity in the workplace is created by complex societal challenges, continuously changing contexts, and rapid technological developments (Kalinauskaite et al., 2020). This requires more interdisciplinary collaborations among professionals in and between organisations. It also asks that current organisations and their professionals be more adaptive, contain boundary-spanning competencies, and be open to learning to be able to deal with innovations and work in a continuously changing and complex workplace environment. Thus, learning and development is an important part of our labour market. In The Netherlands, it is increasingly perceived as a joint process where learning, working, and innovating come together (Schipper et al., 2022). After all, learning allows companies/SMEs to improve and innovate their products, services and work processes. In other words, one can say that working = innovating = learning (Schipper et al., 2022).

Although learning is not similarly approached in each sector or context, research on learning organisations showed that these organisations increase performance and capital (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). According to Marsick and Watkins (2003), there are three levels that play a role in becoming a learning, innovative organisation: the individual level, team level, and the level of organisational learning. Next to this, it is important to be consciously in contact with your external environment (Marsick & Watkins, 1999, 2003) (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Learning organisation (Marsick & Watkins, 2003)



In their work, they combine these three levels by referring to learning organisations, which can be characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p. 118). As shown in Figure 2 and Table 1 below, they also identified seven characteristics of learning organisations, each operating on a certain level of learning: 1) create continuous learning opportunities, 2) promote inquiry and dialogue, 3) encourage collaboration and team learning, 4) create systems to capture and share learning, 5) empower people toward a collective vision, 6) connect the organisation to its environment, and 7) provide strategic leadership for learning. In short, this model incorporates two key organisational components - people and structure- and identifies seven different but interconnected characteristics of a learning organisation as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, taken from Marsick and Watkins (2003, p. 139).

Table 1. Seven dimensions of a learning organization

No.	Level	Dimension	Description
1	Individual	Create continuous learning opportunities	Continuous opportunities are provided for people to learn on the job.
2	Individual	Promote inquiry and dialogue	The culture supports people's sharing of views, questions, feedback and experimentation.
3	Team	Encourage collaboration and team learning	People are expected to learn and work together; collaboration is valued and Rewarded.
4	Organizational	Create systems to capture and share learning	Technology allows people to share learning and is integrated with work.
5	Organizational	Empower people toward a collective vision	The organization shares a collective vision with its members; people participate in developing and implementing the vision.
6	Organizational	Connect the organization to its environment	The organization is connected to its internal and external environments; people see and respond to these connections in their work.
7	Organizational	Provide strategic leadership for learning	Leaders model and support learning; strategic leadership is used to move the business forward.

Source: Marsick and Watkins (2003: p.139).

Table 2. Key results

Key results	Definitions
Financial performance	State of financial health and resources available for growth
Knowledge performance	Enhancement of products and services because of learning and knowledge capacity (lead indicators of intellectual capital)

Source: Marsick and Watkins (2003: p.139).

The seven dimensions of Marsick and Watkins (2003), as illustrated in Table 1, fall into individual, group or organisational levels of learning and system (environment) areas. Moreover, this model not only categorizes key dimensions of learning organisations but it also incorporates them by specifying their relationships (Birdthistle, 2006). Lastly, Marsick and Watkins (1999, 2003) research showed that these learning organisations increase performance and capital (see Table 2).

In other words, in a learning organisation, a continuous process of development and improvement takes place as all people involved in the organisation are focused on the organisation's goals and ambitions and continuously learn during their work to help realise them (Odor, 2018). This does not happen automatically. Indeed, it means that day-to-day work and 'learning' constantly merge, as it were, and align with the organisational goals and ambitions. This learning sometimes takes place formally (e.g., via training courses) but mainly occurs informally by learning from each other on the shop floor, by learning from new tasks, and by collaborating with (foreign) clients or suppliers.

The individual's willingness and the organisation's facilitation and support are both required for learning and innovation in organisations. However, since the urgency and interest for learning/research and development are not always present, key figures (as managers, HR

professionals, and other key figures) who stimulate research and development are essential. These persons have a key position in connecting people and organisations and in developing networks. Also, due to the increased complexity, more and more professionals will take on the role of stimulating learning and innovation in their work. Therefore, more insight into what they do and how they operate in cross-border organisations is increasingly relevant and urgent. Several previous studies have investigated the role of key figures in organisations, but specifically, we are interested in cross-border entrepreneurs/organisations. However, to our knowledge, no studies have explored how cross-border learning organisations innovate according to the model of Marsick and Watkins (1999, 2003) and which role key figures (as leaders and boundary spanners) have in becoming a learning organisation. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate through the eyes of those key figures how small and medium-sized cross-border enterprises learn and innovate in the Dutch-German borderland.

Methodology

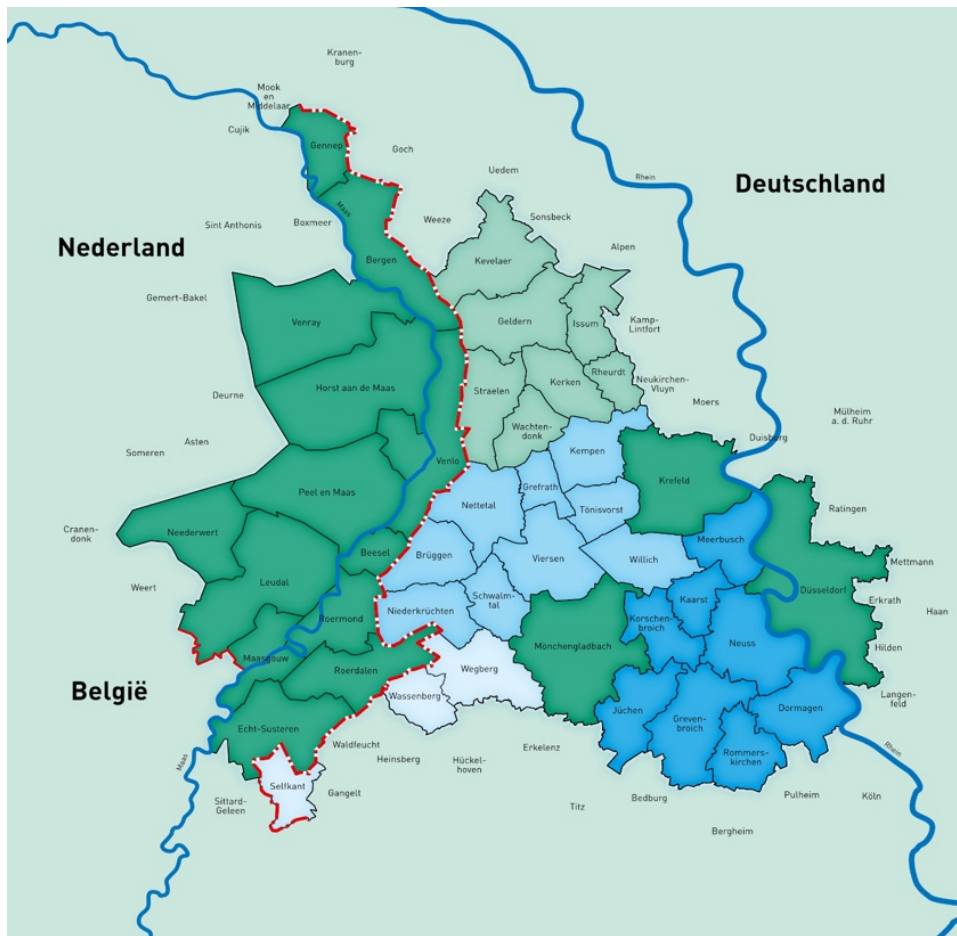
Design

We applied an interview study to collect qualitative data as our main research design. The qualitative approach involved desk research to analyse existing literature on cross-border SMEs and identify common barrier levels, as detailed by Makkonen and Leick (2019) and literature of learning organisations by Marsick and Watkins (2003). As shown in Table 1, the model clearly and comprehensively delineate the learning organization concept. It delineates the concept from an organisational culture and hence offers sufficient measurement domains for constructing a scale (Jyothibabu et al., 2010), which we operationalized as interview topics. A semi-structured format was selected for this study because it is commonly used when there is pre-existing knowledge about the topic, but additional details are required. This research design supported the exploratory nature of our question and study.

Research context

The euregio Rhine-Meuse-North is one of the five Euregios along the Dutch-German border. It has been committed to strengthening contact between the two countries since 1978. The main goal of the Euregion is to reduce border barriers for living, working, doing business, and studying, as well as strengthen the area's identity as a cross-border Dutch-German region.

Figure 3. euregio Rhine-Meuse-North



As illustrated in Figure 3, each area with thick outlines represents a municipality that is part of the euregio rijn-maas Noord. The thick red line with white stripes represents the border between the Netherlands and Germany. The blue lines represent the river Maas (on the left side) and the river Rijn (on the right side). The colours of the municipalities are undefined. All participating SMEs were located in this euregio Rhine-Meuse-North. The background information on the Dutch-German borderland, as described in the introduction, is intended to offer context for the environment in which the concerned SMEs operate and to better understand the experiences of entrepreneurs involved in cross-border business.

Sample

We used theoretical sampling to seek and collect data (Patton, 2002). We predominantly made use of our professional network and the network of our research group to reach out to potential participants. The study sample includes a combination of 11 leaders (e.g., managing director,

business owner, departmental director). There were also 3 employees that can be considered boundary spanners (individuals who possess particular abilities and characteristics suited to bridge organisational boundaries (Levina & Vaast, 2005). Boundary spanners, therefore, play a number of important roles, including building effective personal relationships as well as demonstrating an ability to manage in non-hierarchical decision environments through negotiation and brokering (Williams, 2002). We deliberately have chosen leaders or boundary spanners since they influence a working climate in which employees are encouraged and supported to share and use knowledge in their work (Lee et al., 2016). Our 11 participants are linked to 9 different organisations (referred to as ORG-#) that are considered cross-border organisations in the region Rhine-Meuse-North, which means they have are close to the Dutch-German border. Most organisations are SMEs, only one is not; however, we added it to the sample as the organisation is mentioned as an example of cross-border business (in this specific case concerning employing a significant number of German coworkers in the Dutch location) by many other organisations, and, more important, because of the insightful input about HR issues, such as how to build and maintain a German workforce in a Dutch company. Table 3 shows the diverse affiliations and organisations and gives an overview of other sample characteristics. Furthermore, we added some information about the typology of the cross-border aspects.

Table 3. Sample

Organisation	Size; country locations	Cross-border	Interviewee(s) affiliation [reference]	Industry
ORG-1	SME; NL	Sales from the NL in Germany	CEO/owner [STB] and sales manager [LWB]	IT
ORG-2	SME; Germany	Sales from Germany in the NL	CEO/owner [MNT] and Sales [ABT]	Trade; IT
ORG-3	SME; NL	Sales and service from the NL in Germany	CEO/owner [JDM]and HR [EBM]	Manufacturer of machines
ORG-4	SME; NL and Germany	Production and sales both from Germany and NL	CEO/owner [TJJ] and plant manager [EPJ]	Trade of fuel
ORG-5	SME; Germany and NL	Production and sales both from Germany and NL	Managing director [MMB]	Tree farm
ORG-6	SME; NL	Sales from the NL in Germany	CEO/Owner [MNA]	Cardboard production
ORG-7	SME; NL and Germany	Production and sales in both NL and Germany	CEO/owner [PMA] and sales [SKA]	Archive systems
ORG-8	SME; NL and Germany	Production and sales in both NL and Germany	CEO/owner [SDS]	Data centre and wiring
ORG-9	ME; NL	German Employees in NL location	HR director [TRV]	Office materials

Although all participating SMEs are doing cross-border business, the manner in which they embody cross-border entrepreneurship can be totally different (e.g., Möller et al., 2019).

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews, which offered in-depth insights into the current experiences of leaders of cross-border organisations about how learning is embedded and developed in the organisation in general and how the learnings are precisely connected to the cross-border aspect. All interviews took place face-to-face at the locations of the respective interviewees, which enabled us to interview them in their natural habitat. Interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024 by four researchers, of which two hold a PhD, one is a doctoral student, and one is a MSc student. Interviews were conducted by one or two researchers.

To comprehensively cover themes influencing remote work experiences and effectiveness, each interviewee was asked a set of open-ended questions to allow for comparisons across interviews. This approach also allowed participants to discuss any emerging themes they found significant, leading to more varied and in-depth findings. The interviews, averaging 75 minutes each, were recorded and transcribed verbatim in the language of the respondent. Documents for informed consent were signed by all participants. The interviews were conducted in Dutch or German, based on the participant's preference.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, we utilized coding according to the method described by Gioia et al. (2012). This coding was conducted using the Atlas.ti software (v.24.1). The coding consists of first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. The first-order concepts were created using open coding and consisted of the fundamental elements identified in the interviews.

We did not form our final second order codes yet, but for this conference paper we build our findings section on a first round of coding and different rounds of discussion among the two main researchers. Some clear trends or issues emerged from the data that are presented in the following section and are substantiated by a variety of quotes.

Findings

In our findings, we explored cross-border organisations (Smallbone & Welter, 2012) through the lens of learning organisations (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Our findings were plotted on the three levels of the learning organization: organisation/enterprise, team and individual in relation to the SME's external environment. Then, their positioning is described, followed by zooming into how cross-border and learning merge within the organisation on the more practical, individual and team level. In addition, we present emerging insights about cross-border organisations, combined with related insights on how cross-border organisations can be considered or seen as learning organisations (level of external environment).

Working as a cross-border and learning organisation

Table 4 below presents information per organisation to illustrate how cross-border is included in learning activities, and we have checked the data for relations between concepts. Although our data is described on each level of the learning organisation model (Marsick & Watkins, 2003), we do not cover all aspects of learning organisations (LO). Then, we use the LO lens to look at the cross-border content, guided by the groundedness of the (interview)codes. Our findings focus on four issues, illustrated by a selection of quotes:

- Learning during work and learning next to work (linked to the first dimension/individual level);
- Systems used to facilitate learning (linked to the fourth dimension/organisational level);
- Work meetings (deliberation) as a system of learning (idem/team and organisational level);
- Role of leadership in learning (linked to the seventh dimension/organisational level linked to its environment).

The cross-border aspects of learning are presented in bold text.

Table 4. Practice of working cross-border as a learning organisation

Organisation	Learning during work; next to work	Systems used to facilitate learning	Deliberation as a system of learning	Role of leadership in learning
ORG-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - going through training to obtain certification from the supplier of the product - Offering what is needed - Offering language courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - System to log knowledge (f.i., client input) - Own development department to develop software 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Pizza sessions to discuss developments and improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - n/a
ORG-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering language courses 	-	-	-
ORG-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tag along with a colleague to learn - Apply internally for another position - Most experienced welder trains colleagues (during en next to) - Offering trainings or courses next to work via OOMT - Offering language courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training officer - Internal 'wikipedia' to collect all knowledge about our machines and specifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Knowledge meetings, open for all - Monthly meeting with all (short) - Quarterly meeting with all (long) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Management got a training in talentdevelopment and learning organisation - Dealing with the leadership pipeline
ORG-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training to meet legal acquirements - We try to facilitate it during working time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proces descriptions (SOP's) - ISO and TÜV (various systems), including training and learning elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Yearly meeting with all employees - Daily meetings with the chauffeurs - Monthly MT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Management by walking around - Being an example
ORG-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Onboarding with a buddy - "Learning means being guided by an experienced colleague" [MMB] - Offering training if needed, depending on the level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training officer - CRM system with all product information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Meetings at all levels (MT, department, logistics etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involving the management layers about production to give input about improvements and help to make decisions - Dealing with the leadership pipeline
ORG-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering training if needed - Offering language courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - QR system to collect new ideas about improvements - Quality systems - New ERP system implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Daily deliberation about quality, machine performances, sales - Monthly meeting with offices - Quarterly meeting with all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenging employees to combine asking a question with thinking about the answer
ORG-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal training by internal quality officers during worktime - Onboarding program - Offering language courses 	- n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Several meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being on location physically
ORG-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering language courses - Offering training if needed - Buddy system (everybody has a buddy) - Going through training to obtain certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training officer - Logging audit results of the yearly quality audits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Weekly technical sessions open for all - Several meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open door policy - Dealing with the leadership pipeline
ORG-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning on the job in most departmentst (buddy-system) - Training young management including coaching - Online Leadership Training - Onboarding program of 2 months - Offering language courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning / development department - Good Habits - Employee assistance program - Idea box - Client satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal (yearly) meetings - Several ways of deliberation, however, not structured. Teams should have meetings, but we do not prescribe how often 	-

The first dimension of learning organisations covers the creation of continuous opportunities to learn on the individual level. We give some examples of learning opportunities and see three trends. The first one is that most organisations offer language training to cope with clients on the German (or Dutch) side of the border. The second one is that learning is offered in a broad sense, guided by the questions 1) what is needed, 2) what is the need of employees, 3) what do we need to keep up with external requirements, such as certifications, legal requirements, requirements of suppliers, or quality systems (such as ISO). Learning is facilitated both during and outside working hours.

The fourth dimension of learning organisations refers to creating systems to maintain and share learnings (organisational level). The main systems used are ISO and similar systems, but also own designed or 'professional' systems such as Excel, CRM software or logging software. Besides, many work with education- and trainingplans that are managed by internal HR and/or trainingofficers, a/o are guided by ISO and like systems.

The seventh dimension of learning organisations is about the strategic leadership to facilitate learning in the organisation (organisational level aligned with its environment). This appeared to be difficult to specify, despite the input during the interviews about being an example as leader, facilitate and stimulate learning, offering learning opportunities, and dealing with the leadership pipeline.

A final element we want to emphasize is related to cross-border learning and concerns that employees might also not be interested in learning. For instance, [MNA] argues that although "there are employees who are constantly challenging themselves, you also see that there are employees who are fine with it all, who don't need or want challenges in that area or whatever." [MNA]. One given explanation could be that "the moment the level of education does get a bit lower, you see that happening more often" [MNA]. Others experience this in similar ways. For instance, [EBM] states that employees are not very enthusiastic about language courses. They are not forcing employees to do so, but they offer these courses to them, be it German, Dutch or English. On the other hand, they require employees to master one of these three languages because otherwise, it makes internal cooperation too difficult. Also [EPJ] experiences this trend, that some employees just want to hear "am I doing ok, or not", without having to do additional training. This is not only a hindrance to organisations developing into the direction of a learning organisation but also to improve and develop cross-border endeavours.

Positioning as a cross-border and learning organisation

Some cross-border organisations do not consciously or purposely position themselves as such. For instance, the CEO of ORG-3 has never even considered adding the cross-border aspect to the organisation's vision despite the significant contribution to the organisation's turnover of about 80%. He states: "I personally would not see a need to put international business in the vision" [JDM]. The way they position themselves is client-focused but not related to crossing international borders, namely: "To keep our customers' production processes running profitably and efficiently" [JDM]. Another entrepreneur, the owner of ORG-6, also did not consider adding cross-border activities in the recently newly developed vision statement because "we don't actually see the border as a border" [MNA]. However, in their Circular Mission Statement, they "very explicitly [state] that we look for our partners, and that is the customers and suppliers mainly in a 200-kilometre radius around the company, based on circular thinking" [MNA]. This automatically leads to a cross-border view on doing business due to the organisation's location in the Northern part of Limburg and the close borders with Belgium and Germany, but it is substantiated by circularity, not a cross-border focus per se. A third example concerns ORG-1, which distributes specific HR software on the German market which significantly contributes to this (Dutch) organisation's turnover and profit, but they have no explicit ways of positioning it as a cross-border organisation. A common characteristic of these three SMEs is that they are located in the Netherlands, where they serve the German market.

Some cross-border organisations with locations on the other side of the border (Dutch or German) more consciously position themselves as cross-border. For instance, ORG-8 positions itself as an "ICT service provider in the Euregion, [with] Data Centres in the Netherlands and Germany" (derived from the website of ORG-8). Or, the internal vision statement of ORG-7 mentions the aim of becoming "the most complete and trusted archiving partner in Western Europe by 2025. Not the biggest, but the most complete and trustworthy", according to [PMA].

However, the other organisations we interviewed have not added this specific cross-border aspect in a formal way, for instance, in their vision statement. For instance, ORG-9, with its location on the Dutch side of the border, considers itself as a cross-border organisation, first due to its independent locations in different European countries (e.g., France, Romania) and second due to the significant share of German employees, next to mainly Dutch employees, that live in Germany but work in The Netherlands. They specifically employ German employees, mainly in its call centre, to serve the German customers. This organisation is set up and completely geared to these German employees. For example, when it comes to the spoken

language within the company and to help with legal regulations and tax laws, and exemptions on typically German days off [TRV]. Another example concerns ORG-4, with locations near the Dutch-German border, both at the Dutch and German border, with a distance of about 8 km. With their Dutch roots but a relatively long history of serving the German market from the Dutch branch and since a few years from a German branch too, they do consider themselves to be a cross-border organisation. However, instead of positioning themselves as such, it is more perceived as a given fact, as something normal, without giving it extra attention in positioning and vision or strategy. Their vision does not relate to the cross-border context but has a strong client focus, namely, “offer the widest possible range of products to our customers” [EPJ].

The above insight can be seen as a relevant indicator for at least three aspects in the fields of cross-border business and learning organisations:

I. First aspect relates to the concept of effectuation as a way to develop cross-border businesses.

This certainly does not apply to all cross-border organisations, but some of the respondents explained how the cross-border business development emerged as part of the organisation, which can be categorized as effectuation more than causation. For instance, [PMA] tells how they started a location in Germany, just a few kilometres away from the Dutch-German border and their main office in The Netherlands: “The former owner, he had already bought a piece of land in Germany here just across the border, so we wanted to start there anyway. Yes, that's actually how we started those four countries.” [PMA].

Another example to illustrate a kind of coincidence to enter the German market is given by the CEO of ORG-1:

“Twelve years ago, ten years ago, 2014, <<the software mother company>> at that time also had the naughty idea we are going to market the online product in Germany as well. But at that time, of course, they basically had nothing [there]. And we have contact with those people, and at that moment we thought...Hey, I'm here in that border region. I speak the language, we all speak the language. (...) And that has culminated in the fact, that now, (...) let's say 30-50% of our turnover, we make in Germany. Or yes, for German clients, we should say well, we do that for German clients. So in that sense, that market is just super interesting for us, super important in life.” [LWB]

The third example concerns ORG-4, which explicitly choose Germany to expand the organisation (which relates to causation), however, once the choice was made, the entrepreneurial way of building the location and organisation came into place:

“Yes, really, here are the opportunities to grow a business. And, look, in the Netherlands you hardly get a permit anymore what you get here for such a <<organisation type>>. Yes, and we want to get ahead of the market from Germany, so to speak. So that's why we actually consciously chose Germany, but also within the back of our minds that the rules in the Netherlands are becoming increasingly strict. CO2, all farms, and in the Netherlands, the rules are more flexible. So we just wanted to give the company a chance there, an investment like that, then you're better off in Germany than here [in the Netherlands]. We ventured. But you see, there is just, yes, (...) we jumped right into that market. (...) That's very fast growth what we did. Actually, the administrators, the municipalities and the directors [in Germany] couldn't keep up, as fast as we grew. So we were always three steps ahead. Then you almost overrule everybody too because you go so fast. And chances right away, taking those chances, taking those deep chances, we're actually already fast.

II. The second aspect relates to the abovementioned quote that some cross-border entrepreneurs do not see the border as a border.

These entrepreneurs just pulled a circle around their organisation to define their geographical market. For instance, the owner of ORG-4 explains:

“It was indeed [...], because here is <<location of organisation in The Netherlands>>, and here is the border. Now, if I draw that circle, I end up in an area.... We call The Netherlands densely populated, but even more people live in North Rhine-Westphalia than live in the Netherlands” [TJJ]

Besides this purely commercial focus, they are, so to say, less impressed by the border in terms of barriers. Indeed, working cross-border “will be one more dimension or one more difficulty” [SDS] to undertake cross-border. But [TJJ] continues:

“And of course, the border also means something for the administration, for the GmbH, with German regulations, payroll taxes in the Netherlands and Germany... but, for us, that border does not exist.”

Also CEO and owner [JDM] perceives this in a similar way:

“I would almost say 80% [of our turnover is realized] cross-border. But maybe it's because it's normal for us. And that's also why I just said that I don't see hindrances to collaborating with Germany. Or with the Czech Republic or with Sweden. (...) So that's why maybe that's not included [in our vision]. And that it [cross-border work] has just become very normal for us.” [JDM]

One possible explanation for why the border is not seen as a border is given by [MMB] who works as a Dutch citizen as a MD in a German company (with a near location at the Dutch side of the border too), when extensively stating that the cross-border barriers for entrepreneurs with a proximity and personal history at the border is tempered and might even be a psychological one:

“Indeed, I think closer to the border, those cultures are also closer together than people realise. Yes, I think if you look at here, this is obviously so close to the border, a lot of things are also similar. The German hierarchy, formalities and things like that, I encounter less here than I have seen in the past at other companies. So yes, even that is different because you are closer to the border. So, I think that being closer to the border also ensures that those things actually get more mixed and need to be less of a bump. And there is already cross-pollination. People are already going into the Netherlands to make purchases there. People go from the Netherlands to Germany to make purchases. The language is already spoken more or less. Whether in dialect, but that applies back and forth. So, even here in the company, there are plenty of people who understand Dutch well or speak it that way. And vice versa, of course, on the other side of the border, there are also plenty of Limburgers who speak perfect German or at least understand it. And so you see that this mixing is already quite a part. So, the obstacle doesn't have to be as big as people think. So it's more, for a lot of people I think, more of a bump they impose on themselves than it actually has to be a bump. A kind of psychological barrier.” [MMB]

The HR director of ORG-9 relates it to the relatively long time experience their organisation has with working cross-border in terms of hiring many German employees and actively working with German students (among other nationalities): “We take it for granted, I think, that cross-border, that many other companies don't yet have. That's why I say, we do a lot of things without thinking much about it.” [TRV]

In sum, the absence of an explicit positioning as a cross-border business, despite the organisational dependence on this element of entrepreneurship, seems not an indication of not undertaking cross-border. On the contrary, it seems to be an indicator of the integration of cross-border work in the organization, and it has become a normal day-to-day way of working. This might be reinforced by not seeing the border or seeing it less as a barrier to involvement in cross-border business and thus developing a vision for it.

III. The third aspect concerns how cross-border business is included in the way cross-border organisation learn and develop as a learning organisation

Or stated the other way around, how working and developing as a learning organisation might enhance cross-border entrepreneurship. We tend to see a similar pattern for the aspect of learning as we described for the aspect of cross-border business development, which is that most organisations do not include learning as an aspect of their vision, strategy, and/or positioning. This pattern, as far as our sample is concerned, emerges even stronger compared to the pattern of cross-border business.

None of the organisations formally and explicitly include learning, or innovating, or developing as a learning organisation in the formal means of positioning, such as the strategy, mission, or vision statements. To illustrate this, we first focus on the learning organisation dimension of developing a shared organisational vision of learning and innovating. In Table 5, an overview is given as a summary of the following four aspects:

- How is learning included in the organisational vision;
- How are employees involved in developing the vision;
- How are employees involved in implementing the strategy in their daily work;
- How is learning viewed by management apart from the formal vision.

Regarding the first aspect, none of the organisations added learning or innovation explicitly in the vision or strategy of the organisation. Following the same logic as applied earlier about the findings of the cross-border aspect, this is not a value statement but an observation. However, [MNA] acknowledges that “a good vision is obviously incredibly important because everything fits it. (...) So I think if you don't have that in the organisation, you quickly become a bit of an unalloyed projectile. That you can't keep the focus. (...) But then you basically just don't do everything”, which advocates for including learning into the vision, too.

The second issue is that involving employees to develop a vision is applied in different ways, varying from no input or involvement of employees in formulating or developing the vision (e.g., ORG-6) to engaging employees in helping to develop the vision (ORG-8). However, the first steps to define a draft vision are reserved for management, with employees having no or a minor role, limited to giving input. This changes once the statement is developed and implementation starts. Then we see them move towards engaging and involving employees, even trying to get it into their “DNA” [MNA] by means of monthly or three-monthly formal meetings to talk about the progress, among other things. However, a discrepancy emerges

between the formal way of defining and working with a vision and the way the organisations' attention to learning and developing into a learning organisation, as indicated with the fourth presented issue in Table 5 below. The perception emerges that learning is an integral part of the organisation's activities, facilitate improvement and innovation in the organisation, and that learning gets attention from leadership. Support for this latter finding is stated by three leaders:

“Learning lives in the organisation; Opportunities to progress. That you can develop. That people can also grow from production to a position in the office, whether that ends up being commercial or business support or logistics. So there is definitely development through the company. And we always try to promote the possibility of learning” [MMB] and “If you are curious and want to learn, we do offer you opportunities.” [EPJ] And finally, “I think everyone should keep learning” [EBM]; The designer-engineers “have to spend a minimum of 30% of their time at innovating, testing, and developing” [JDM].

Table 5. Dimension of developing a shared vision on learning

Organisation	Learning in vision	Involvement in developing the vision	Involvement in implementing the vision	How learning is viewed by management, apart from the vision
ORG-1	No vision document	Informing employees about decisions about the direction	No vision	"I myself am of the facilitation variety, I think you should let people do things that energise them" [LWB]
ORG-2	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
ORG-3	No part of the vision; Learning is defined as a core value derived from the vision	Involving some key players (management) and informing employees and asking for input.	The derived core values are leading in deliberations, hiring new employees.	"I think everyone should keep learning" [EBM]; The designer-engineers "have to spend a minimum of 30% of their time at innovating, testing and development" [JDM]
ORG-4	No part of the vision	No vision	No vision	"We can all learn from each other." [EPJ] "Within frameworks and within limits. But lots to develop yourself. If you are curious and want to learn, we do offer you opportunities." [EPJ]
ORG-5	No part of the vision; will be no part of the currently new to develop vision	Top-down process of informing	"And they are all hard goals. There are very few soft goals in the organisation." [MMB]	"Learning lives in the organisation; Opportunities to progress. That you can develop. That people can also grow from production to a position in the office, whether that ends up being commercial or business support or logistics. So there is definitely development through the company. And we always try to promote the possibility of learning" [MMB]
ORG-6	No part of the vision	No input from employees, but from MT, clients and suppliers.	"And we are actually continuously trying to bring people along in the fact that they have co-responsibility in carrying out their mission and vision. And that we don't just want to throw it on the stage, and then implement it, but try to constantly trigger them to go along with that development. And also trying to get it so into their DNA, or own organisations into their DNA, that people are also always silent, stretching for a moment but if I do this does this fit into our mission and vision, does this fit with what we want." [MNA]	n/a
ORG-7	No part of the vision	"No, I laid down that vision myself. (...) No one else did, so to speak. Where do we want to go? So I just put a picket line in the ground somewhere." [PMA]	Presentation to the (former) board.	"Which is actually also that is something I do try to encourage. Only is that in this organisation is that I'm not saying that from the past it hasn't happened, but you notice the need for itself that it hasn't." [PMA]
ORG-8	No part of the vision	"In the end, of course, I come up with the horizon. Only the question is how do we get to that horizon?" [SDS]	"And then of course you are going to engage people. How are we going to work towards that and what are we running into?" [SDS]	"You cannot apply what you learnt in school, say, five, six years ago, now. So you will have to keep up constantly in our organisation." [SDS]
ORG-9	No part of the vision	No involvement	"My impression is that there is a lot of room for own input creativity." [TRV]	"Actually, learning is also offered in the broadest sense of the word. And it varies from department to department." [TRV]

Discussion

Theoretical implications

In our findings, we investigated cross-border organisations (Makkonen & Leick, 2019) through the lens of learning organisations (Marsick & Watkins, 2003) to explore how cross-border SMEs learn and innovate in the region Rhine-Meuse-North.

Based on our findings, two trends they caught our attention. Firstly, organisations are applying different characteristics that are part of learning organisations (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). This focuses mainly on formal, more explicit learning, in characteristics on the individual and team level (e.g., courses, meetings). Moreover, on the organisational level in relation to its external environment (Marsick & Watkins, 2003), none of the organisations formally and explicitly include learning (innovating nor developing as a learning organisation) in the means of positioning, such as the strategy, mission, or vision statements, as would be expected according to Marsick and Watkins (1999, 2003) and Odor (2018). This does not mean that these organisations cannot be considered learning organisations nor that learning and innovating does not take place in these organisations. On the contrary, the image emerges that learning is a fixed element of the organisations activities (on certain levels). It is facilitated with the aim of improving the organization and innovating, and it also gets attention from the leadership level. Although it is not explicitly written in their vision, it is felt in the organisation on individual and team level. Of course, there was much variation in SMEs ,and the learnings are different between SMEs, but we tend to see a pattern in the investigated SMEs in the euregion Rhine-Meuse-North. Though they are learning, they are not learning as a collective (cross-border) organization, and therefore, they do not resemble a continuous process of development and improvement (Odor, 2018).

Furthermore, it appears that similar to the way the organisations in this euregion deal with learning, they also cope with the cross-border aspect. So it is also seen that, in different ways, cross-border working is part of the organisation's DNA. However, despite their relevance and importance, they also deal with cross-border aspects seemingly implicitly and unconsciously. Our findings indicate that effectuation (Saravathy et al., 2014) seems to be the strategy for developing cross-border businesses (in the Rhine-Meuse-North region). Although this certainly does not apply to all cross-border organisations, some of the respondents explained how the cross-border business development emerged as part of the organisation, which can be categorised as effectuation more than causation. The difficulty with this is that entrepreneurs

might not realise what they are missing out (on as stated by one of the entrepreneurs who did not have a German GmbH) on financial and knowledge performance. This can be seen as a missed opportunity because research on learning organisations showed that these organisations increase performance and capital (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). Also network theorists highlight the crucial role of learning and network knowledge. This is essential for entrepreneurial learning and understanding the learning process in internationalisation (cross-border business), as supported by Johanson and Vahlne (2009).

Last but not least, this could also be explained by the role of similarity of region and proximity of the location of the SME to the border. The entrepreneurs of our study in the region Rhine-Meuse- North do not experience large differences (similarities in language/dialect), nor were they located very far from the border. So there might be a lack of locational benefit to do or step further into cross-border business, so innovation and economic growth might be missed (Lundquist & Trippel, 2013; Makkonen & Williams, 2017).

Limitations and Future research agenda

The insight about the lack or implicit positioning as a cross-border organisation does not involve a value judgment. First, because this research does not specifically focus on the positioning of SMEs. Second, and more important, working cross-border -is it by means of employing German employees, by means of having a German location and/or GmbH, or by means of trading with and servicing the German market- (following the broad definition of Smallbone & Welter, 2012), does not have to be included in the vision and explicit positioning to be or be perceived as a cross-border organisation. Third, because the participating organisations work cross-border, although in different ways and for different reasons.

A limitation is that we only had 11 respondents and they were mainly Dutch entrepreneurs (SMEs), so we mainly have looked through the Dutch perspective. Therefore, our next step is to interview more respondents, and more specifically German entrepreneurs (with a GmbH).

Another interesting perspective is that these key figures (leaders and boundary spanners) are not fully aware of their role in learning in the organisation, nor in cross-border business. This could have been explained differently by the proximity of location, similarity of regions, or being unaware of their competences (Broadwell, 1969). So, more research on their role and their boundary-spanning activities for learning a cross-border entrepreneurship would be

recommended. Especially with a more strategic focus, to make them aware of the impact of developing into a learning organisation and their role in this innovation, and the impact of their (undertaken or left out) activities.

Practical implications

As mentioned above, cross-border businesses and entrepreneurs might not know what they are missing by being unaware. Unawareness on the level of developing into a learning organisation as on the level of consciously applying cross-border entrepreneurship. In that case, they might not be so different from SMEs in general. Our (cross-border) organisations appear to mainly focus on ‘business as usual’, so the aspect of cross-border learning is, in most cases, limited to language courses instead of cross-border or more collective learning as an enterprise.

Conclusion

SMEs involved in cross-border business, in the region of Rhine-Meuse-North region, learn at the different levels of a learning organisation, but all in a different manner. Unfortunately they do not learn at every level and characteristic of a learning organisation, which results in a of alignment in learning on the individual, team and organisational level. In that view, they do not differ from SMEs in general.

Despite increasing complexity, due to technological revolution and societal changes, there is no trend that learning (as innovation) gets more attention in cross-border business. Thus, the way and the extent to which they work as learning organisations does not seem to contribute extra to tacking the complexity of cross-border business/entrepreneurship.

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