

Learning from Everyday Work

How Understanding Real Work Supports Human-Centred Transformation

Positioning within RETRAKT

New regulatory and market requirements associated with the circular economy are forcing companies to adapt or redesign existing work and process routines. Such transformations require more than simply describing future target processes. They first require an understanding of how work is actually carried out today, what demands employees have to manage, and what adaptations they make in their day-to-day work.

This article presents perspectives on work and corresponding approaches that can support this understanding. Its central question is how knowledge of work as it is actually performed can be used to support the human-centred design of transformation processes.

Why Everyday Work Is an Important Source of Knowledge

Traditionally, organisations tend to learn primarily when something goes wrong. Accidents, disruptions, quality problems and other unwanted events are investigated, their causes analysed, and corrective measures derived. This approach is both useful and necessary. However, it draws on only a small fraction of everyday work as a source of learning.

The vast majority of work, by contrast, proceeds without attracting attention. Tasks are completed, products are manufactured, information is passed on, and problems are solved without resulting in a reportable event. Precisely for this reason, the conditions and practices that make successful performance possible often remain invisible.

This is where the concept of Learning from everyday work comes in. It focuses on everyday work and asks under what conditions it actually takes place, what difficulties arise, and how employees cope with changing demands. The underlying idea is straightforward: if we want to improve work, we should not only investigate why it occasionally fails. We should also understand why it succeeds most of the time.

1. Mindset: What Happens When “Nothing” Happens?

The first shift in perspective is to regard apparently uneventful work as something worth learning from.

The fact that a task has been completed successfully does not necessarily mean that it was performed exactly as planned or specified. There can be substantial differences between formal procedures and the way work is actually carried out.

An illustrative example is provided by Konrad "Conny" Siegel. Reflecting on his own experience with time studies, he describes how workers would deliberately demonstrate a more elaborate way of performing a task in the presence of the time-study analyst, while using more efficient approaches during normal operations (Siegel, 2015).

This example is more than a historical anecdote. It illustrates a fundamental distinction between Work-as-Imagined and Work-as-Done: between how work is assumed or intended to be performed and how it is actually carried out under real-world conditions.

Normal, successful work is therefore not simply the error-free execution of a prescribed process. It embodies practical and experiential knowledge of its own. Employees take situational conditions into account, manage conflicting objectives, compensate for missing resources, and adapt how they work.

What happens when "nothing" happens?

This question is therefore more than a rhetorical opening. It changes what becomes an object of learning. It is no longer only disruptions and failures that require explanation; everyday success does as well.

2. Mindset: Where Is the Greatest Potential for Learning?

A second shift in perspective concerns the volume of learning opportunities available. Unwanted events occur comparatively rarely. Exceptionally good outcomes are rare as well. The vast majority of work lies between these extremes: in unremarkable, everyday operations.

The following figure should be understood as a conceptual model rather than as an empirical claim that work outcomes always follow an exact normal distribution. It illustrates an important mechanism: work outcomes emerge from the interaction of numerous small variations and adaptations. Conditions change, information is not always fully available, resources fluctuate, and demands may compete with one another. Employees respond to these circumstances.

Most of the time, these variations and adaptations balance one another in such a way that the outcome remains acceptable and unremarkable. Only rarely do they combine to produce an exceptionally good or an unwanted outcome.

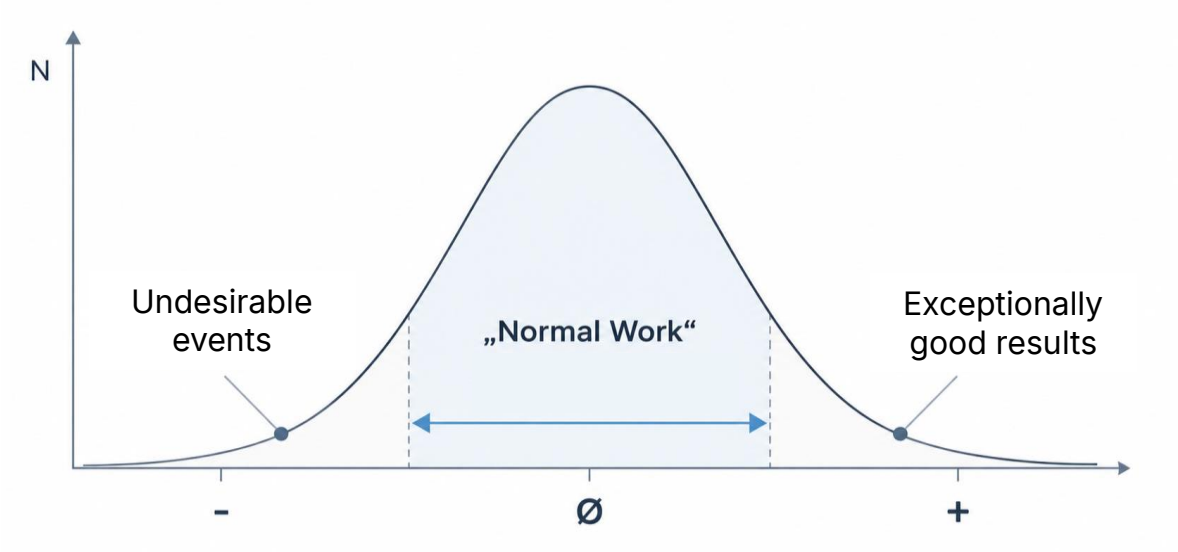


Figure 1: Work outcomes as a conceptual model – most outcomes fall within the domain of "Normal Work".

Normal everyday work is not characterised by low variability; it is merely unremarkable in terms of its outcomes.

This is precisely why it offers such substantial volume of learning opportunities. A single accident can provide a wealth of information. Yet everyday operations provide a far larger number of situations in which we can observe the conditions that facilitate or hinder work and the adaptations employees make in response.

Focusing exclusively on rare negative outcomes therefore means drawing on only a small proportion of the experience available within an organisation. This perspective builds on with Resilience Engineering and Safety-II, where performance variability is not inherently regarded as a disruption but as a necessary basis for maintaining the ability to act under changing conditions (Hollnagel, 2009; 2017).

3. Skillset: Asking the Right Questions

This mindset leads directly to the question of skillset: how can knowledge about normal work actually be accessed? The most important starting point is not a complicated analytical instrument, but conversations with the people who perform the work.

However, this requires a different way of asking questions. Traditional safety conversations often focus on hazards, knowledge of rules, and compliance. Learning from everyday work serves a different purpose. Its first aim is to understand.

A generic set of questions can be organised around six perspectives:

Perspective	Generic question
Difficulties / demands of the work	What makes this work difficult?
Preconditions before the task	What do you need beforehand for the task to go well?
Resources during task performance	What do you need while carrying out the task to complete it safely and efficiently?
Obstacles / disruptive conditions	What gets in the way of completing this task safely and efficiently?
Functional rationale of actual practice	What is the benefit of doing the work this way?
Adaptation / situational interpretation of requirements	Tell me about situations in which you have to interpret, prioritise or supplement rules, procedures or processes to get the work done.

Table 1: Generic questions for learning from work. Author's translation and adaptation based on IOGP (2022, p. 35).

One of these questions occupies a special position: "What is the benefit of doing the work this way?" It is not necessarily suitable as an opening question. The phrase "this way" presupposes that a specific actual practice has already become visible. Only once it becomes apparent, for example, that an employee is working differently from the way originally intended does it make sense to ask about the function of that way of working.

This represents a substantial change in perspective. Rather than immediately asking why a requirement has not been followed, the first question becomes: What benefit does this actual way of working provide under the given conditions? This does not mean automatically endorsing a deviation. It means seeking to understand it before evaluating it.

This is one of the core conversational competencies required for Learning from everyday work. Nazaruk (2023) contrasts such questions with more traditional, control-oriented safety questions. The aim is to make demands, conditions, and adaptations visible.

4. Toolset: From Conversation to Systematic Analysis

Learning from everyday work is not a single method. Different formats can be used depending on the question at hand. They vary in effort, depth, and scope of application, but share a common principle: making real work visible.

Format	Makes work visible through …	Suitable when …
Walk-through / Talk-through	demonstration and explanation at the workplace	a specific task needs to be understood
Debriefing	joint retrospective reflection	a training session, simulation, or event is being reviewed
Learning Team	facilitated reconstruction	an observation, issue, or event needs to be understood from a systemic perspective
FRAM	process modelling / functional analysis	a process involving couplings and variability needs to be analysed

Table 2: Common formats for learning from work.

A walk-through can be conducted directly at the workplace. A debriefing involves jointly reconstructing a situation that has already been experienced. Learning Teams draw on the knowledge of multiple participants to develop a systemic understanding of

an observation or event. FRAM enables a more structured representation of a process and its couplings, making variability and interactions visible.

Despite these differences, the approaches share a common core:

> **Frontline knowledge is used in a (facilitated) conversation to make real work visible.**

The process is similar across many approaches:

- People with first-hand operational experience are brought together.
- A specific work situation is reconstructed.
- Variability, demands, and difficulties are identified.
- System conditions are made visible.
- Actions are derived and fed back into the organisation.

The decisive question is therefore less about which instrument is inherently "best". What matters more is whether the chosen format is capable of making the relevant work visible – and whether those involved have the conversational and facilitation skills required to explore actual work without prematurely reverting to control and evaluation.

5. Learning from Work as an Instrument for Transformation

This perspective becomes particularly important in transformation processes. Transformation is often initially described in terms of changes to formal structures: new technologies are introduced, processes are adapted, responsibilities are changed, or additional legal requirements are implemented. The actual transformation, however, takes place in everyday work.

At the same time, this perspective connects with concepts established in German-speaking work science and ergonomics, particularly work-related learning and the design of work conducive to learning (Winter et al., 2021; Dworschak et al., 2021; Frenz, Mühlbradt & Boos, 2023).

This is directly relevant to RETRAKT. The project supports companies in the textile and apparel industry in implementing new circular-economy requirements and explicitly follows a human-centred approach: "Employees are our experts." Work and process routines in areas including design, procurement, production, and data management need to be adapted to new requirements. Resilience Engineering provides a strategic framework for managing these changes in real-world work situations.

The relevant question is therefore not only what a future process should look like formally. It is equally important to understand how the existing process is actually carried out today:

- Where do difficulties already arise?
- What information do employees need?
- Which resources are lacking?

- Which demands compete with one another?
- Where do formal processes need to be adapted in everyday work?
- What working solutions have employees already developed?

Particularly in far-reaching transformation processes, this knowledge can help prevent new requirements from being designed solely from the perspective of the intended future process.

Learning from everyday work therefore does not treat employees merely as people affected by or addressed by change. It draws on them as experts in how the existing work system actually functions.

This does not mean that every existing practice should be preserved. On the contrary, only by understanding why a particular practice has emerged and what function it serves can we assess what can be changed in a redesign and which requirements must continue to be met. For the design of successful transformations, this is a crucial distinction.

6. Implementation: New Tools Require a New Logic

Individual conversations, walk-throughs, or Learning Teams are not sufficient if learning from everyday work is to become sustainably embedded within an organisation. The IOGP roadmap identifies several implementation tasks:

- **Clarify roles and resources:** establish responsibilities and provide training, coaching, and coordination.
- **Bring senior leadership on board with the mindset:** change language, expectations, and resourcing.
- **Build capabilities among managers and teams:** develop both the mindset and the practical ability to apply the tools.
- **Disseminate the concepts internally:** establish a shared language and common understanding.
- **Adapt existing processes:** integrate Learning from everyday work into organisational routines, systems, and instruments.

New tools must not once again be used primarily to monitor deviations and ensure rule adherence.

A conversation intended to help understand the actual conditions under which work is performed loses its purpose if employees subsequently expect sanctions for openly reporting the adaptations they make. Learning from everyday work therefore begins not with the tool, but with the mindset.

Conclusion

Organisations possess a substantial source of knowledge that is often only partially utilised: everyday work. Here, employees have to deal with changing conditions, overcome difficulties, and adapt their work every day. Most of these adaptations do not result in accidents or disruptions. Precisely for this reason, they often remain invisible.

Learning from everyday work makes them an object of learning. The central question is therefore no longer only: Why did something go wrong? It is complemented by another: How does work succeed under real-world conditions – and what can we learn from it?

This perspective is particularly relevant to transformation processes. Anyone seeking to design the work of the future should first understand how today's work actually functions.

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