

# SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

The article discusses the importance of self-directed learning for human resource development, different aspects of successful self-directed learning at both individual and organizational levels. The article presents empirical findings on employees' attitude towards self-directed learning and its components, the results of the comparative analysis of the attitudes of employees working in public and private organizations. For example: the majority of the respondents is not sure of define the concept of self-directed learning incorrectly, do not associate it with conscious assumption of responsibility and setting the learning objectives; half of the respondents (53 per cent) agree that their organizations appreciate pro-activity, i.e. the projection of an event in advance rather than response to the event occurred; within the private organization, employees receive leader's assistance and encouragement more frequently, they also have better learning possibilities and highly valued learning culture within the organization. Employees from the private organization are more positive about self-directed learning than those in the public organization. The former are more ready for self-directed learning and use a wider variety of learning possibilities: they make use of specialists' and their colleagues' assistance and their knowledge acquired in other spheres of life, they learn from their own experience and experimentation, observation and modeling others' performance more often than do the respondents from the public organization.

**Key words:** human resource development, self-directed learning, readiness for self-directed learning, organizational culture, learning at workplace.

**Classification JEL:** M12 Personnel Management

## 1. Introduction

Constant changes in the economy, labor market and organizations have an inevitable impact on people working in the organization and create a requirement to constantly update the existing competences and to acquire new ones. Access to continuous learning and acquiring new skills in a continuous development process allow employees to realize their full potential. Such development covers both organizational and individual levels as the skills acquired in one area of life can be transferred to others (Joy-Matthews, 2006).

Foreign researchers have attached great importance to self-directed learning in the last decade (Garavan, 2004; Ellinger, 2004; Tobin, 2000; Grow, 1991; et al.); different aspects of this form of learning are being explored in the fields of human resource management, sociology, andragogy and psychology.

In Lithuania, self-directed learning has not received sufficient attention yet and is still underestimated both by employees and employers; it is rather frequently not considered as an educational activity because there are misconceptions that people learn only when they are taught (Jucevičienė, 2007).

Self-directed learning is particularly relevant in today's complex situation when both leaders and employees must assume personal responsibility for their learning. Even if there is some learning strategy developed in the organization, only the employee knows best what knowledge (s)he needs most and how this new knowledge can be applied to improve individual, group and company work performance (Tobin, 2000).

*The aim of this article* is to analyze the position of self-directed learning in the context of human resource development and to compare peculiarities of self-directed learning in two organizations from private and public sectors.

## 2. Self-directed learning in the context of human resource development

Human resources development (HRD) in an organization is examined from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. From the quantitative point of view HRD is understood as the number of people with certain skills recruited at the right time and place to perform certain functions of the organization (Joy-Matthews, 2006). From the qualitative point of view, HRD is understood as liberation of individual potential, realization of potential possibilities and the ability to integrate learning into behavior. In the field of human resource development both individual and organizational levels are distinguished (Garavan et al., 2004). When discussing the individual level, it should be noted that human resources are one of the forms of capital that consists of individual competences. One of the main goals of most organizations is to encourage employees and leaders to share their knowledge and capabilities within the organization and to systematise this knowledge in the practice of the organization (Gnyawali, Offstein, 2007).

At organizational level, human resource development is understood as a special set of developmental factors that helps to achieve the goals of the organization. Most researches that are related to teaching in workplace are in most cases directed to planning of teaching and assessment of individual learning programmes (McCauley, Hezlett, 2001). The importance of learning as a continuous process has recently been emphasized. Learning programmes are still important, but a person must self-manage his/her own development, update and expand his/her competences regularly to achieve effective job performance. It is noteworthy that personal development is often regarded as a continuous and unintended result of work experience (McCauley, Hezlett, 2001). Human resource development, however, covers different aspects including self-directed acquisition of knowledge.

## 3. The concept of self-directed learning

At the individual level, two developmental directions are distinguished: development of oneself as a personality and development of one's competences and abilities that have value in labor market (Garavan et al., 2004). It is emphasized that individuals themselves assume responsibility for planning their own development and the organization must ensure that possibilities for the development are available to all employees. Human resource development is crucial to the organization since providing individual possibilities and increasing work efficiency at the individual level helps to materialize full potential of the organization. It is therefore important that learning is encouraged and supported by organizational culture. Self-directed learning is important for the organization as self-directed learners start to apply new technologies most efficiently faster than the other employees, make less costly mistakes to the organization and save its material resources. As for the components of self-directed learning, it should be noted that self-directed learning is defined ambiguously. Some authors (Grow, 1991; Tobin, 2000; Jucevičienė, 2007; et al.) emphasize the aspect of personal characteristics, while others (Song, Hill, 2007) stress the importance of the process or the context.

It is difficult to give one definition of self-directed learning because it can be analyzed from three different dimensions: sociological, pedagogical and psychological ones (Ponton et al., 2005). It is the psychological conceptualization that states that education is essentially a self-directed and self-regulatory process when the learner can ignore the instructions or precisely memorize the material without critical reflection, can seek to change or develop his/her own perception of the information, etc. (Ponton et al., 2005). Tobin (2000) and McNamara (2008) have a similar opinion and argue that any learning is essentially non-formal and self-directed: we learn by thinking about the standpoint of the author of the book we have read, by visiting presentations, etc. – all these are forms of self-directed learning.

According to Boyatzis (2002), an adult learner masters only what (s)he wants to and other knowledge acquired is quickly forgotten. Thus, self-directed changes are conscious and self-directed learning is the aspiration to change oneself on condition that the person is aware

of the change and understands this process. In Boyatzis' opinion (2002), a person can start self-directed learning at any stage of the process but this usually happens when the person realizes discontinuity of the process or experiences urgent need. A situation of self-directed learning appears when the learner manages both the learning goals and learning tools. This distinguishes self-directed learning from formal learning where the institution manages both of these aspects; and from non-formal learning where the learner manages the goals and the institution manages the tools.

Many authors agree that the level of learners' readiness to assume responsibility for their own learning may vary; self-directedness may appear in the course of learning. Preparation is situational: tasks must be of the level of individual's readiness so that (s)he could successfully perform those tasks and thus help him/her develop independence. According to Drucker (2004), people admit that learning is a continuous process that helps to keep up with daily changes. But the most difficult task is to teach people to learn. Therefore, when analyzing self-directed learning, the role of a mentor or an institution is still relevant in this type of learning context. Personal development *tette-a-tette* (mentoring, tutoring) is one of the most significant ideas in the field of human resource development (Joy-Matthews, 2006). Tobin (2000) distinguishes four possible types of learning in an organization: independent other-directed learning, independent self-directed learning, dependent other-directed learning, and dependent self-directed learning (Table 1).

Table 1: Learning in an organization

	OTHER-DIRECTED LEARNING	SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING
DEPENDENT	<p><b>Quadrant III</b></p> <p>The organization chooses the study subjects, methods and the material. An employee can choose the timetable and the most appropriate method from the proposed ones. At the end of the teaching process the employee has to demonstrate the knowledge on the subject content.</p>	<p><b>Quadrant IV</b></p> <p>An employee chooses the study subjects, methods and the material himself/herself. The employee himself/herself is responsible for what has been learned.</p>
INDEPENDENT	<p><b>Quadrant II</b></p> <p>The organization chooses the study subjects, methods and the material and provides the instructions. At the end of the teaching process the employee takes an examination.</p>	<p><b>Quadrant I</b></p> <p>An employee chooses the study subjects but (s)he is dependent on the timetable and learning methods defined by the company.</p>

Source: according Tobin, 2000

Organizations must motivate employees to start lifelong learning and to make their own choices that may lead them to personal satisfaction (Sleezer, 2004). It should be noted that self-directed learners are more likely to share their knowledge and to establish contacts than other employees (Ellinger, 2004). Self-directed learning at work can encourage employees to actively cooperate with their colleagues in order to deal with their real problems in professional practice (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Tobin (2000), McCauley and Hezlett (2001), Ellinger (2004), Gnyawali and Offstein (2007), and Webster-Wright (2009) note that learners' responsibility for their learning and development in the organization grows. This is determined by such factors as reduction of finances for employees' training or lack of funds. However, short-term teaching methods such as lectures, seminars, conferences or study stays quite often seem to be sufficient for

organizations. Such episodic updating of information is usually provided in a didactic style, separately from authentic work experience. This diminishes the value of ongoing trainings and increases the gap between theory and practice. A. Webster-Wright (2009) reveals possible reasons why programmes for professional development do not change according to the research findings: bureaucratic work context, lack of time and stress at work.

In discussing the factors contributing to self-directed learning, the role of the leader is particularly accentuated. The direct leader often influences the creation of favourable conditions for self-directed learning: by creating learning environment, enabling self-directed learning, showing initiative. The leaders quite frequently also have to train their employees, to give them advice therefore they often assume the role of an instructor, mentor, facilitate the learning process and ensure feedback (Ellinger, 2004; Webster-Wright, 2009).

#### 4. Theoretical model of the research

The theoretical model of the research is developed on the basis of the works of Garavan (2004), Jucevičienė (2007), Grow (1991), Webster-Wright (2009) and Ellinger (2004). Individual and organizational levels are the two components of human resource development distinguished in our model that affect each other. An individual will not be able to develop sustainably if there are any obstacles for learning at organizational level (no possibility to learn in workplace, due to regular overtime there is no time left for learning, personal learning goals do not match with the ones of the organization etc.). *The objective of the empirical research* is to determine and compare peculiarities of employees' self-directed learning in private and public organizations.

*Research methods:* analysis of literature, questionnaire survey, statistical processing of the research data. The questionnaire provides the description of statements about self-directed learning; Likert's scale was used for the assessment where 1 stood for 'totally disagree with the statement' and 5 stood for 'totally agree'. Validity characteristics of the scale – Cronbach's alpha value of the coefficient of homogeneity – is equal to 0.825, which shows that relevance of the scale used in the survey and its reliability is rather high. To compare the means of two independent samples Student *t* criterion was used. The research was conducted in 2009. As there were a small number of employees in the organizations analyzed (38 employees in the private sector organization and 51 employees in the public sector organization), all the people in those organizations were surveyed; in total there were 89 respondents. SPSS program was used to analyse the data received.

#### Analysis of research findings

Respondents' attitude towards learning is shown in Table 2. The majority of the respondents agree that the person himself/herself is responsible for his/her learning and that learning is important for seeking better results at work. Independent learning is viewed positively (62 per cent of the respondents agree that independent learning is effective).

Table 2: Respondents' attitude towards self-directed learning (%)

Statements	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Totally agree
Everyone is responsible for his/her own learning.	1.12	3.37	3.37	<b>46.07</b>	<b>46.07</b>
I learn efficiently when I do it independently.	1.12	7.87	28.09	44.94	17.98
To achieve better results at work, you need to learn all the time.	1.12	0	6.74	<b>38.20</b>	<b>53.93</b>

Source: own

Respondents' opinion about self-directed learning and knowledge acquired independently differs (Table 3). The majority of the respondents is not sure of define the concept of self-directed learning incorrectly, do not associate it with conscious assumption of responsibility and setting the learning objectives. More than half (53 per cent) of the respondents tend to suggest that independent learning is not systematic and must be enriched with other forms of learning. It can be assumed that such results are caused by respondents' different readiness to learn independently and a narrow conception of self-directed learning as a situation of self-directed learning appears when the learner manages both the goals of learning and learning tools. Thus, respondents do not associate self-directed learning with conscious purposeful learning when the person achieves the best results.

Table 3: Respondents' attitude towards independent learning (%)

Statements	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Totally agree
Self-directed learning is episodic learning.	16.85	22.47	39.33	16.85	4.49
Knowledge acquired independently is not systematic and thorough enough.	14.61	39.33	14.61	26.97	4.49
Self-directed learning is spontaneous and it occurs in all activities even without thinking about it.	0	24.72	39.33	29.21	6.74
Self-directed learning is not systematic enough and must be enriched with other forms of learning.	5.62	13.48	29.21	22.47	29.21

Source: own

At organizational level, an important factor for self-directed learning is organizational culture. Figure 1 provides with informants' responses to such aspects of organizational culture as pro-activity, colleagues' assistance and sharing their knowledge, learning culture and appreciation of self-directed learning in their organizations.

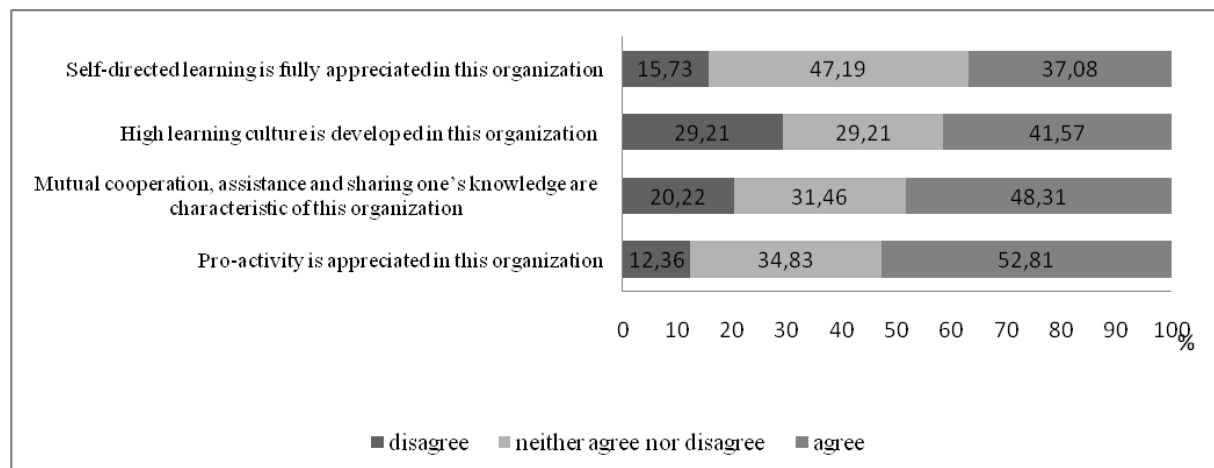


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents' answers about organizational culture

Source: own

Half of the respondents (53 per cent) agree that their organizations appreciate pro-activity, i.e. the projection of an event in advance rather than response to the event occurred. 47 per cent of the informants are unaware of whether their organizations appreciate self-directed learning. It can be noted that mutual cooperation, assistance and knowledge sharing are not sufficiently developed and to improve organizational culture the above-mentioned factors should further be encouraged in the organizations surveyed.

According to the research data, respondents' general satisfaction with possibilities of self-directed learning in the organization is not high (Figure 2). Less than half of the respondents agree that they have good conditions for the realization of their potential in the organization. 46 per cent of the informants say they do not have any possibilities to learn in their workplace. The respondents do not have enough information about organization's learning strategy and their learning possibilities within the organization as well as what aspects of learning are important to their organization.

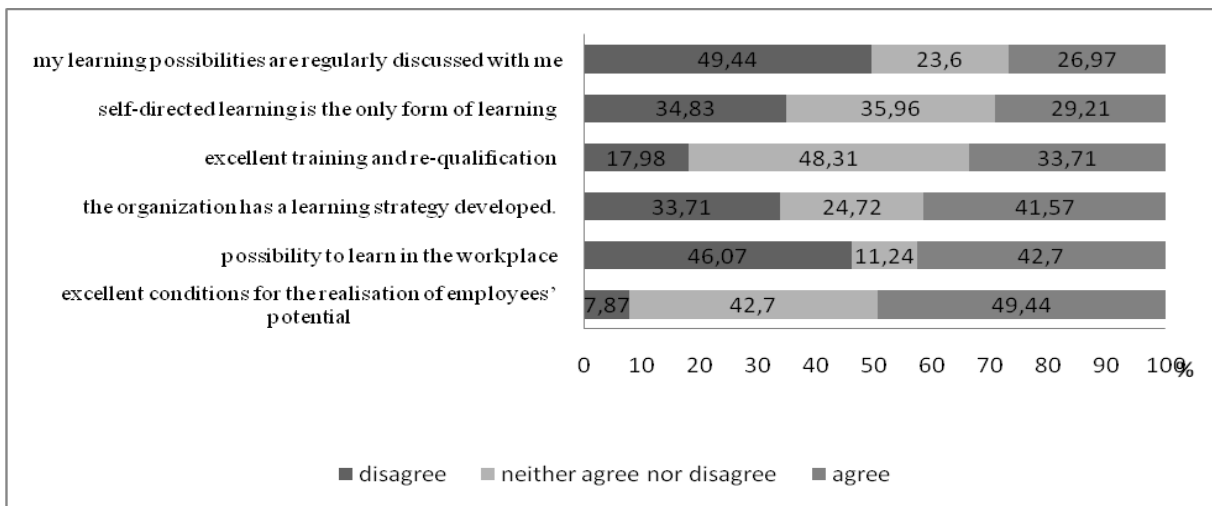


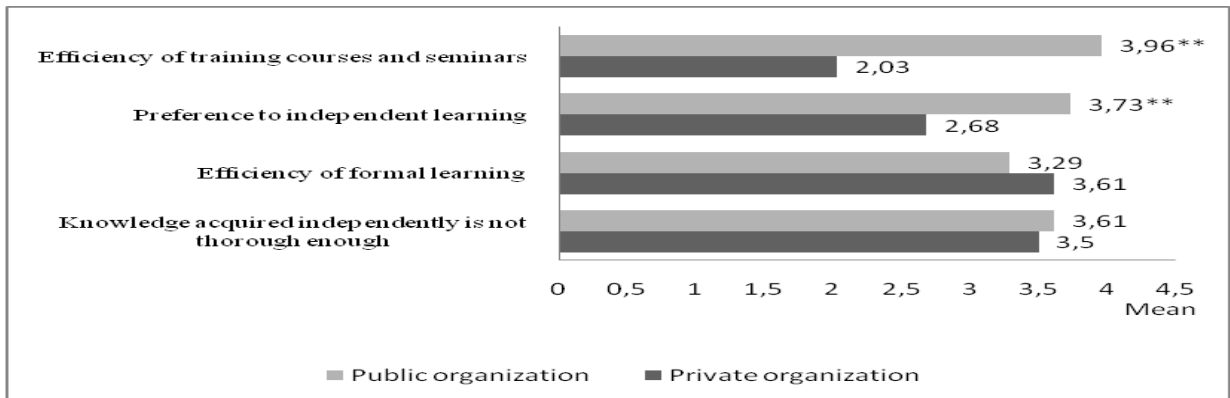
Figure 2: Respondents' satisfaction with possibilities of self-directed learning in the organization

Source: own

Comparison of attitudes to self-directed learning among employees of public and private organizations has revealed that employees from the private organization are more positive about the knowledge acquired independently, while employees from the public organization prefer the statement on efficiency of formal learning (Figure 3).

Employees from both organizations assess non-formal training courses and seminars rather high. The attitude of the employees from the private organization towards learning with their colleagues' assistance is statistically significantly more positive than the one in the public organization. More employees from the public organization believe that knowledge acquired independently is not systematic and thorough and that independent learning must be enriched with other forms of learning (3.96 and 3.96;  $p < 0.01$  respectively as compared to 2.03 and 3.03;  $p < 0.01$  in the private organization). Although a large number of the employees surveyed in both organizations appreciate formal and non-formal training courses and seminars more, analysis of the results suggests that at individual level employees from the private organization are more positive about self-directed learning than those from the public organization. The value of the factor of employees' readiness for self-directed learning is also statistically significantly higher in the private organization, i.e. employees from the private organization assess this factor higher than their colleagues in the public organization and they

are more ready to have self-directed learning (3.7 points as compared to 3.5 points in the public organization;  $p < 0.05$ ).

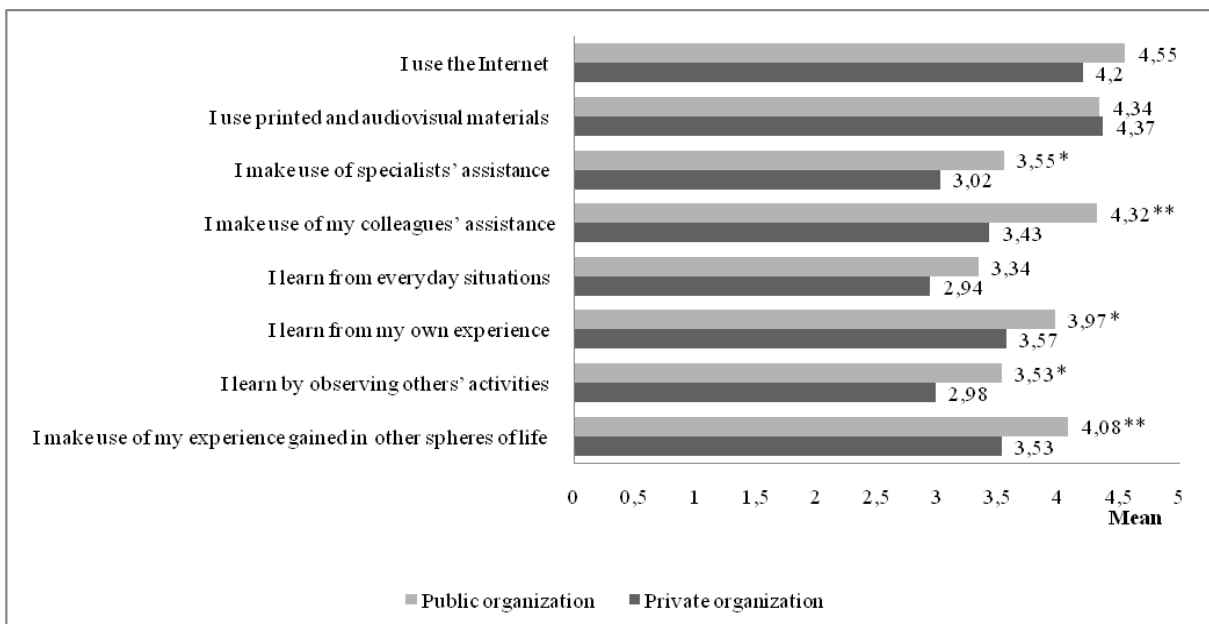


\*\* $p < 0.01$

Figure 3: Comparison of attitudes to self-directed learning among employees of public and private organizations

Source: own

Employees in the private organization make use of various learning possibilities, use specialists' and their colleagues' assistance more frequently, transfer the competences acquired in other spheres of life to work environment, learn from their own experience and experimentation, from observation and modeling of others' performance (Figure 4).



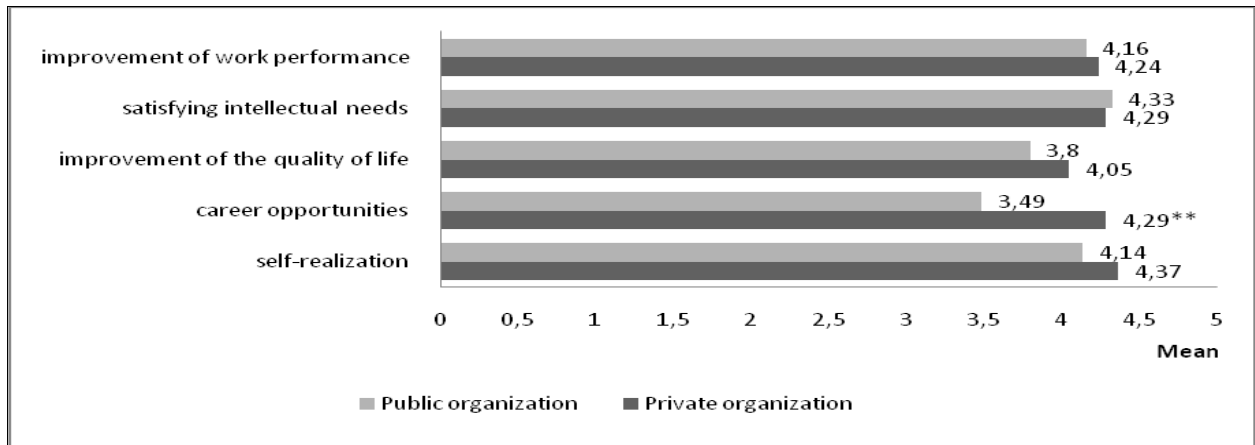
\*\* $p < 0.01$  \* $p < 0.05$

Figure 4: Comparison of the means of respondents' answers about learning activities

Source: own

Employees from the private organization relate self-directed learning to external motivation (namely to better career opportunities) statistically significantly higher than those from the public organization (Figure 5).

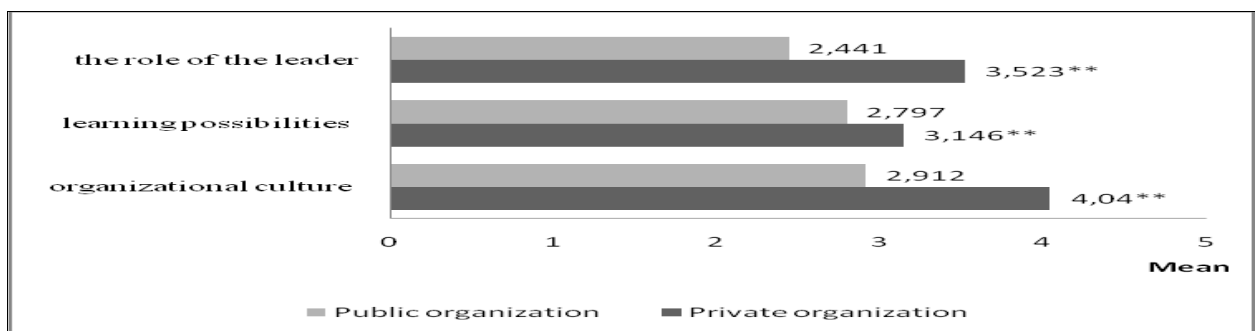
In the private organization employees receive leader's assistance and encouragement more frequently, they also have better learning possibilities and highly valued learning culture within the organization (Figure 6).



\*\*p<0.01

Figure 5: Comparison of respondents' learning goals

Source: own



\*\*p<0.01

Figure 6: Comparison of evaluation of the factors of self-directed learning at organizational level

Source: own

## 5. Conclusions

Individual's self-directed learning can be associated with a variety of variables and analysed in various aspects. Such learning can take place in various environments, for instance in the family, workplace or community. There are two parallel levels of self-directed learning in the context of human resource development (HRD): individual level and organizational level. At individual level self-directed learning is associated with learner's independence, readiness for self-directed learning, personal approach to learning and its goals. At organizational level self-directed learning in the context of HRD is mostly associated with such factors as the role of the leader and organizational culture.

The research in two organizations has revealed that the concept of self-directed learning is not clear for the majority of the respondents. A large number of the informants believe that self-directed learning is not systematic enough. Most of the respondents consider the knowledge acquired through self-directed learning as not thorough enough. Therefore, assumption of personal responsibility for self-directed learning is not fully understood. Some respondents have misconception that a person learns only when (s)he is taught.

Employees of the surveyed organizations think that their direct leaders encourage learning initiatives, experimentation and risk not sufficiently. It is necessary to draw attention to extremely low evaluation of the role and assistance of the leader in the public organization,



whereas employees from the private organization evaluate the role and assistance of the leader statistically significantly higher.

Employees from the private organization are more positive about self-directed learning than those in the public organization. The former are more ready for self-directed learning and use a wider variety of learning possibilities: they make use of specialists' and their colleagues' assistance and their knowledge acquired in other spheres of life, they learn from their own experience and experimentation, observation and modeling others' performance more often than do the respondents from the public organization.

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