

# BILDUNG VERNETZT – DESIGNING AN AGILE LEARNING FORMAT FOR EMPLOYEES AT EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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## Abstract

Educational institutions are undergoing profound changes driven by digitalisation, artificial intelligence and social change. These developments require new forms of cross-institutional collaboration and skills development. Flexible, practice-oriented approaches, self-directed learning and collegial networking are needed to respond to these dynamics. Bildung verNetz is an agile learning format designed specifically for employees in educational institutions to respond to these challenges. In ten-week inter-organisational learning journeys, participants work in heterogeneous small groups on self-selected, practice-relevant goals and build sustainable professional networks in the process. The format combines proven agile learning principles with the specific needs of the education sector. In the long term, it aims to build a permanent "community of practice" (CoP). Initial experiences in the Wissensstadt Heilbronn indicate promising effects at the individual and institutional levels and underscore the potential of agile learning formats for the education sector.

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## 1 Introduction

Educational institutions operate in an environment characterised by rapid and profound change that is becoming increasingly complex as a result of digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI) and social change (García-Morales et al., 2021; Rheinhardt, 2020). This complexity places new demands on administration, teaching and research, which require innovative forms of learning and collaboration (Rost & Hafer, 2020). These include, in particular, the continuous development of employees' skills and cross-institutional exchange. Ideally, such measures are work-integrated, flexible enough to fit into everyday routines, and designed to foster active learner participation (Muzam et al., 2023; Noe et al., 2014).

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Communities of practice (CoP), that is, groups of individuals with shared areas of interest (in this case, education), are an effective way of promoting these conditions (Wenger, 2011; Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Rost & Hafer, 2020). They rely on trust-based relationships within the group and enable mutual support and collaborative learning through regular interaction. Because such relationships rarely develop spontaneously, deliberate initiatives and suitable formats are required. Agile learning formats offer considerable potential in this context, as they not only support competence development, but also promote the emergence of sustainable networks and collaborative learning processes (Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Ternes & Hufnagel, 2022). One such initiative is Bildung verNetz (English: *education connected*; BiNe). As a networking and continuing education format, it is specifically tailored to the needs of teachers and staff in educational institutions (Geiß et al., 2025).

### 1.1 Initial situation and target group

Current dynamics in the education sector present institutions such as universities as well as training and continuing education providers with significant opportunities and complex challenges. Technological developments, particularly digitalisation and AI, create possibilities for integrating digital media into teaching and learning processes. At the same time, these developments necessitate the design and implementation of new, innovative teaching and learning formats to keep pace with ongoing transformation (Rost & Hafer, 2020). Addressing these challenges effectively requires a dual focus: the continuous development of individual competencies and the establishment of collaborative approaches that enable knowledge sharing and joint problem-solving across institutional boundaries.

Against this backdrop, BiNe positions itself as an inclusive initiative targeting all employees within educational institutions, irrespective of their professional field, role, or hierarchical position. The current scope of BiNe encompasses 15 educational institutions within the Wissensstadt Heilbronn\*. These institutions provide (higher) education, offer professional qualification and continuing professional development programmes, and engage in research, innovation, and science communication, all of which have a direct impact on society at large. Existing networking events and cooperation projects within the region demonstrate that pooling expertise and resources can generate substantial benefits for the educational landscape. Consequently, BiNe aims to move beyond mere institutional coexistence by leveraging synergies, consolidating resources, initiating innovative projects, and fostering collaboration, particularly among employees who have not yet participated in joint initiatives.

BiNe offers a platform for bringing together employees from various institutions. A critical prerequisite for successful inter-institutional networking and cooperation is knowing the stakeholders involved and understanding their core topics, objectives, competencies, responsibilities, and interests. In BiNe, participants learn how this knowledge and collaboration can help them achieve their own goals. Over time, this is intended to lead to the creation of a CoP in the Wissensstadt Heilbronn. Consequently, BiNe can be adapted as a training programme for use in other urban contexts characterised by multiple educational institutions, such as Karlsruhe or Munich. By doing so, BiNe has the potential to serve as a scalable model for fostering innovation and cooperation in diverse educational ecosystems.

### 1.2 Agile learning

Current challenges in the labour market and education sector require a transition from standardised training to more flexible, adaptive continuing education formats (Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Graf & Edelkraut, 2021). Agile learning, which originated in agile working practices, supports learners in their individual development while simultaneously generating effects such as networking

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\* Wissensstadt Heilbronn is an association of 15 educational institutions all located in the city of Heilbronn. These institutions comprise, among others (cooperative state) universities, a university of applied sciences, various research centres, and a science center. They are united by the willingness to promote science transfer, scientific research, academic training and communication.

and collaboration at the organisational level (cf. Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Graf et al., 2017; Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Krehbiel et al., 2017; Longmuß & Höhne, 2017; Ternes & Hufnagel, 2022).

Agile learning formats are characterised by four key features (cf. Augner et al., 2023; Liebhart, 2022):

- i. The focus lies on the learners, who engage in self-directed and exploratory learning.
- ii. The structure of the content enables iterative learning in small units that can be integrated into everyday work.
- iii. Collaboration and co-creation are actively encouraged.
- iv. Digital technologies are purposefully incorporated into the learning process.

A well-known agile learning format is "Working Out Loud" (WOL; cf. Stepper, 2020; see Augner et al., 2023; Graf et al., 2022 on WOL as an agile format), which supports professional development through transparency, collaboration, and networking in iterative twelve-week learning cycles. Participants work in small groups ("circles") on individual goals through regular exchange, mutual support, reflection, and the use of digital networks. Another example is the collaboratively developed framework "lernOS" (cf. Dückert, 2019; see Graf et al., 2017; Graf & Liebhart, 2024 on lernOS and agile learning), which provides tried-and-tested tools for future work and integrates elements of various methods, including Getting Things Done (GTD), Objectives and Key Results (OKR), Scrum, and WOL, into 13-week learning cycles ("sprints"). Participants pursue their goals through peer support in small groups, regular reflection, and strategic networking.

Agile learning formats are flexible, learner-centred concepts that support participants in achieving their goals through appropriate content tailored to their needs. Reflective and interpersonal learning promotes knowledge building and a deeper understanding of contexts (Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021). Based on openness, flexibility, and a focus on cooperation, initially loose groups develop into lively learning communities that enable the establishment and long-term strengthening of CoPs. This principle also underpins BiNe as a training programme: the content is specifically tailored to employees in educational institutions and is based on experience with previous agile methods. It is condensed in eight learning loops ("BiNe-Loops"), which can be worked through flexibly over a period of ten weeks ("BiNe-Journey"). In addition, BiNe emphasises local networking within the Wissensstadt Heilbronn and off-site locations of the local institutions.

### 1.3 Lessons learned from agile learning implementations

To date, agile learning formats have been studied primarily in a corporate context (cf. Augner et al., 2023; Graf et al., 2022; Longmuß & Höhne, 2017). The BiNe project partners also have experience with students (Ondrusch et al., 2021; Quandt & Ondrusch, 2024; see also Meißner et al., 2024) and university employees (Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Ternes personal communication; see also Engelhardt & Warbeck, 2021; Wetterauer, 2020).

Agile learning formats, especially WOL, have shown positive effects on three levels:

- i. at the individual level through improved reflective abilities, increased perseverance, and greater openness and generosity in sharing knowledge (Augner et al., 2023; Graf et al., 2022; Longmuß & Höhne, 2017; Ternes, personal communication; Wetterauer, 2020);
- ii. at the network level through the establishment of personal contacts, a heightened awareness of one's own abilities, the strengthening of soft skills such as team spirit, appreciation, and multi-perspectivity, the support of collaborative work, and the visualisation of results (Augner et al., 2023; Engelhardt & Warbeck, 2021; Graf et al., 2022; Longmuß & Höhne, 2017; Ternes, personal communication; Wetterauer, 2020);
- iii. at the organisational level through improved communication, networking, and cooperation skills, as well as a greater willingness to share knowledge (Graf et al., 2022; Wetterauer, 2020).

WOL also promotes a positive feedback and error culture by viewing mistakes as opportunities for growth and improvement. The aim is to enable long-term behavioural changes that empower

participants to take initiative in the future (Graf et al., 2022). Similar effects have been observed among students. Here, WOL primarily improved digital collaboration as well as communication, reflection, and self-organisation skills (Meißner et al., 2024; Ondrusch et al., 2021). Even though students have different needs than employees in the education sector, the framework conditions are still quite similar. Agile learning formats thus contribute to the acquisition of future-relevant skills (cf. Kirchherr et al., 2018), including digital skills, critical thinking, cooperation skills, self-management, and resilience. In addition, they encourage participants to organise and adapt their own goals and to continuously reflect on new content, a core aspect of lifelong learning.

Despite these advantages, WOL participants also report challenges. For employees from educational institutions, the time required was a major point of criticism (Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Ternes, personal communication). Participants also often found the strong focus on visibility on social media inappropriate (Ternes, personal communication). Among students, (virtual) networking was not always perceived as relevant (Meißner et al., 2024; Ondrusch et al., 2021). In addition, self-directed learning requires a high level of personal responsibility, which can be challenging for both students and employees (Longmuß & Höhne, 2019; Meißner et al., 2024; Quandt & Ondrusch, 2024). These findings suggest that individuals in a higher education context have specific requirements and that different approaches are sometimes necessary, for example, with regard to visibility.

For continuing education and training measures to be successful, whether traditional or agile, it is also crucial that the content is aligned with the target group's needs. However, agile learning formats have a special feature: while the content and learning objectives in traditional continuing education courses (e.g., Excel or communication training) are specified by the instructor, agile learning formats allow adaptation to individual needs. Learners set their own goals, and the content provided serves as a support rather than a prescription. This flexibility appears to be particularly relevant in a higher education context (cf. Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Ondrusch et al., 2024; Quandt & Ondrusch, 2024; Ternes, personal communication).

Overall, these findings justify the development of a special learning format such as BiNe, which is based on the principles mentioned above and emphasises reflective as well as interpersonal learning. In addition, the resources and time constraints of employees are taken into account by offering less content, but in a more targeted manner. Flexible options for implementation make it easier to schedule meetings in small groups, which enhances overall participation. Based on past experiences, four central themes or success factors for agile learning formats can be derived and are applied in BiNe: (i) developing individual skills while fostering interaction and cooperation with others; (ii) willingness to share knowledge and experience, (iii) working within a network, and (iv) working on the skills and mindsets needed now and in the future to keep pace with the changing world of work.

In the following sections, we present the concept of BiNe and discuss findings from three completed BiNe-Journeys. We conclude in a short summary and an outlook on further development and scientific support.

## 2 Methodology

BiNe was developed in response to the challenges identified in the educational sector and draws on insights from established agile learning formats. The programme has been iteratively refined based on participant feedback to ensure relevance and applicability. The “BiNe-Journey” constitutes a ten-week learning and networking journey under the guiding principle “vernetzt & inspiriert wachsen” (grow connected & inspired). During this journey, participants pursue individual goals, engage in professional and/or personal development, and expand their networks.

At the heart of the programme is the “BiNe-Guide”, which serves as a resource for both individual work and collaboration within small, fixed groups (“BiNe-Teams”). The Journey is framed by a total of three accompanied and direct online events involving all participants (“BiNe-Talks”), scheduled at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of the programme.

Following an overview of key terminology (see Table 1), the next section takes a closer look at the BiNe-Guide as the foundation for the developed format and its selected topics.

*Table 1. Terminology of BiNe*

| <i>Term</i>  | <i>Definition</i>                                 |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| BiNe-Journey | The ten-week learning and networking journey      |
| BiNe-Guide   | The accompanying material                         |
| BiNe-Loop    | Thematic block within the BiNe-Guide              |
| BiNe-Team    | Group of 3-4 people                               |
| BiNe-Talks   | Online event with all participants of the journey |

Finally, experiences from the first three BiNe-Journeys with participants from educational institutions in Heilbronn as well as some external locations are presented.

## 2.1 The BiNe-Guide as a central element of the agile learning format

As a central component of BiNe, the BiNe-Guide consolidates support, guidance and self-management strategies. Its design incorporates the four key features of agile learning outlined above (cf. Augner et al., 2024; Liebhart, 2022). As participants pursue their individual goals, the format also enables self-directed learning (cf. Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021) and includes elements of informal learning as it supports learning in authentic, practice-oriented contexts (cf. Noe et al., 2014).

In contrast to formats such as WOL or lernOS, BiNe deliberately limits itself to eight compact topic blocks, the "BiNe-Loops", to reduce the time burden on participants (cf. Ternes, personal communication). These structured learning loops promote iterative learning, deepen or reinforce prior knowledge, and enable sustainable development through reflection and feedback (cf. Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021). At the same time, they remain flexible enough to be integrated into everyday work.

Participants work alone or in small groups of three to four people. These "BiNe-Teams" are heterogeneous in composition in terms of institution, field of activity and, where possible, gender, in order to bring diverse perspectives and experiences into the process. In the exchange, this diversity can be specifically used as a resource for individual and collective learning and mutual support. Regular changes of perspective promote a deeper understanding of different approaches and highlight the value of mutual impulses, regardless of the subject area or field of work. Meetings typically last one hour, are held online, and can be conducted according to the participants' individual preferences. This approach supports exploratory learning, emphasises collaboration and co-creation (cf. Augner et al., 2023; Liebhart, 2022), and enables cross-institutional networking.

The BiNe-Guide functions as a digital "travel guide" that combines various forms of learning. New technologies such as an online course on the ILIAS learning management system and digital whiteboards enable virtual collaboration within the teams. The use of these tools is a core element of agile learning and particularly relevant for flexible learning through exchange and self-study (cf. Augner et al., 2023; Liebhart, 2022; Noe et al., 2014). In addition, participants use the BiNe-Guide Workbook (a PDF document) for individual work and tasks such as familiarization, consolidation, goal pursuit, and reflection. This allows the learning process to be designed independently of time and location while giving participants active control over their learning process.

The structure of the BiNe-Guide and the work in the BiNe-Teams promote activation, networking, knowledge exchange, openness, and interest in new things (cf. Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021). Participants act not only as learners but also as initiators. Beyond the teams, they develop strategies to make themselves and their work visible, for example, via internal platforms such as SharePoints or at events. This approach also addresses previous criticism of the increased use of and heavy reliance on social media in previous WOL implementations (Ternes, personal communication).

Overall, BiNe allows for a flexible design of the learning and networking process by offering many possibilities for individualisation and exploration. According to agile learning principles, participants are at the centre of the training programme (cf. Augner et al., 2023; Liebhart, 2022) and are free to decide which content and impulses are relevant to their goals and development. The goals can be both personal and professional in nature and may vary from concrete plans to



intermediate steps in larger projects. In addition, coaching methods are used to support practical implementation in everyday work and to facilitate applicability for different target groups.

## 2.2 The main topics of BiNe

BiNe content is based on the central goals, which focus on individual goal achievement and development, stronger networking, and the future establishment of a CoP, as well as on the needs of the heterogeneous target group. By combining proven elements from other formats with new approaches, such as coaching, the aim is to strengthen participants and their institutions and prepare them for future challenges – especially with regard to the further development of the Wissensstadt. The content covered in individual and group work can be divided into the following four key topics:

- i. *Working on the self and with others*  
The focus is on self-selected goals, the creation of individual plans for achieving goals, and (self-)reflection. Participants critically examine existing resources and identify gaps that may impede progress. In doing so, they recognise the strategic importance of networking and professional exchange – consistent with the BiNe guiding principle “grow connected & inspired.” Initial relationships within the BiNe-Teams are established to provide mutual support and feedback. Beyond goal setting, this topic addresses fundamental aspects of personal development, including cultivating an open mindset (growth mindset), embracing lifelong learning, and fostering cooperative practices. These elements are essential for navigating complex professional environments and for sustaining adaptability in the face of change.
- ii. *Sharing knowledge and experience*  
The second key topic focuses on collaborative practices and the active exchange of knowledge and experience among participants. Central to this process is the enhancement of communication skills and the deliberate visibility of one’s work and professional contributions. The quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly dimensions such as appreciation, trust, and generosity, plays a decisive role in enabling sustainable collaboration. Although these factors are often overlooked in fast-paced organisational contexts, they constitute critical prerequisites for effective teamwork and long-term cooperation.
- iii. *Working in a network*  
This topic addresses the systematic development of networking competencies within the Wissensstadt. Participants begin by analysing existing network structures and assessing their own network profiles, followed by strategies for targeted expansion and maintenance of their network. Reflection on one’s role and influence within these networks is integral to understanding how individual actions contribute to broader institutional objectives. In addition, participants explore approaches for overcoming barriers to networking, such as limited time resources or uncertainty in initiating contact. Through these activities, the programme seeks to strengthen participants’ capacity to engage in purposeful, cross-institutional collaboration that supports innovation and knowledge transfer.
- iv. *The future self*  
The final key topic provides impetus for engaging with uncertainty, complexity and change in dealing with current societal and organisational dynamics. Participants determine future-oriented competencies relevant to their professional roles and experiment with self-management techniques, such as time management strategies and planning tools. These practices aim to enhance resilience and adaptability in environments characterised by rapid transformation. Furthermore, the topic encourages participants to acknowledge and document their own achievements, thereby reinforcing motivation and fostering a sense of progress. This reflective process contributes to the development of a proactive stance towards personal and professional growth.

Each BiNe-Loop deals primarily with one of the four key topics (see Table 2: ●).

*Table 2. Assignment of BiNe-Loops to key topics*

| Key topic                          | L1 | L2 | L3 | L4 | L5 | L6 | L7 | L8 |
|------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Working on oneself and with others | ●  | ●  | ○  |    | ○  |    | ○  | ○  |
| Sharing knowledge and experience   |    | ○  | ●  | ○  |    | ○  |    | ○  |
| Working in a network               | ○  |    | ○  | ●  | ●  | ●  |    |    |
| The future self                    |    | ○  |    | ○  |    | ○  | ●  | ●  |

However, in order to deepen certain elements over a longer period of time and allow habits to develop, individual elements pertaining to one of the four key topics are also found in several loops (see Table 2: ○).

### 3 Results and discussion

To date, three BiNe-Journeys have taken place, the first in autumn 2024, the second in spring 2025 and the third in autumn 2025. Across these iterations, the format involved approximately fifty individuals (see Table 3 for an overview), the majority of whom were women.

*Table 3. Profiles of BiNe participants*

|                                | Journey 1 | Journey 2 | Journey 3 |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <i>N Participants</i>          | 18        | 21        | 12        |
| <i>Ratio male:female</i>       | 4:14      | 3:18      | 1:11      |
| <i>N Institutions</i>          | 5         | 6         | 5         |
| <i>N Teams</i>                 | 4         | 6         | 3         |
| <i>N Participants per team</i> | 4-5       | 3-4       | 4         |

Participants represented ten institutions within the education sector, including universities, research institutes, and organisations working in areas such as entrepreneurship, science, and the application of AI. This composition reflects a deliberate effort to include actors from both academic and applied contexts, thereby providing diversity of perspectives and experiences.

The participant group was characterised by a wide range of professional roles. These included academic and research positions such as professors, doctoral candidates, and research associates; roles in programme coordination and internationalisation; and administrative and strategic functions covering areas such as quality management, talent development, project management, organisational development, event organisation, and community operations. Additionally, some participants held responsibilities in fields related to educational support, digital learning, and technology transfer.

In terms of qualifications, participants exhibited a broad spectrum of educational backgrounds, ranging from vocational training to diploma, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, extending to professorial appointments. This diversity not only reflects the structural complexity of the education sector but also highlights the need for flexible learning formats capable of addressing varied professional requirements. By bringing together individuals with such heterogeneous profiles, BiNe creates an environment conducive to cross-institutional exchange and collaborative problem-solving, which are essential for fostering innovation and strengthening institutional networks.

To ensure the quality of the programme and to generate meaningful benefits for both employees and their institutions, BiNe is subject to systematic scientific monitoring. This evaluation process is designed to provide an evidence-based foundation for assessing the programme's effectiveness and for guiding its ongoing development. The research framework addresses two analytical levels: the micro level, which focuses on individual participants' personal and professional development, and the macro level, which examines the programme's impact on participating

institutions. Overall, short- and long-term outcomes will be analysed. In this article, we report short-term effects at the micro level and address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the participants' goals and expectations?
- RQ2: To what extent does BiNe support personal development?
- RQ3: To what extent does BiNe contribute to networking?

To address these research questions, participants' experiences were recorded using three short questionnaires at the beginning (T0) and the end of the journeys (T1), and additionally three months after completion (T2). For the purpose of this paper, only data from T0 and T1 will be used. The questions included items rated on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) as well as open-ended questions for free responses.

The participants started their journeys with a variety of individual goals, reflecting both professional and personal aspirations (RQ1). These goals can be grouped into four main categories\* demonstrating the multifaceted nature of lifelong learning and individual personal development, as addressed through BiNe:

- i. *Expanding competencies and enhancing personal effectiveness*  
Many participants expressed an ambition to enhance their skills and increase their effectiveness in their day-to-day work. Their objectives included improving communication and decision-making skills, cultivating stronger prioritisation abilities, and establishing systematic approaches to time and task management. Other participants focused on language learning or acquiring new technical knowledge to support their professional growth. For example, some aimed to enhance their communication skills and develop greater confidence in decision-making, while others set goals such as learning a foreign language or preparing for an MBA application. Additionally, participants sought to broaden their understanding of SEO and website analytics to strengthen their digital expertise.
- ii. *Addressing current challenges and strengthening digital visibility*  
Several participants focused on mastering technological developments and improving their digital presence. Their goals included understanding and applying AI in practical contexts, identifying relevant use cases for AI tools, and promoting their effective adoption within teams. Participants also aimed to strengthen their visibility on professional platforms by creating structured content plans and expanding their networks through consistent engagement and targeted outreach.
- iii. *Advancing one's work through strategic projects, networking initiatives and planning*  
A number of participants focused on driving forward strategic projects and shaping their long-term career paths. Their goals included developing internal employee training concepts, the restructuring of existing programmes, and the planning of future endeavours such as the launch of a new intranet or starting a programme for international students. Others aimed to design and implement a quality management concept, prepared workshops on technological change or finalised scientific publications. Career-oriented objectives were also prominent, such as drafting a business plan or defining career paths as freelance lecturers or trainers.
- iv. *Exploring needs and trends in the professional environment*  
Some participants aimed to deepen their understanding of external requirements and emerging trends to guide their professional activities. Their objectives included clarifying key decision-making criteria for competence management, gaining insights into the regional educational landscape and its future developments, and identifying effective strategies for delivering relevant learning opportunities. In addition, others sought to strengthen collaboration by expanding networks and initiating joint projects with partners beyond their immediate professional environment.

\* AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) were used to cluster the goals. The authors reviewed and validated all AI-assisted outputs.



The majority of the selected goals were professionally oriented and had the capacity to be integrated seamlessly into everyday working activities. Concurrently, the heterogeneity of objectives – ranging from personal skill development and digital transformation to strategic programme design and environmental analysis – underscores BiNe's distinctive strength: the convergence of individuals from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and ambitions to facilitate mutual learning and impactful progress.

Overall, the distribution of goals across the three journeys indicates distinct areas of focus for each. The primary focus of the first journey was strategic projects and career planning. Such projects included programme restructuring, process development and organisational initiatives. Digital and AI-related objectives were found to be of particular significance, while competency development exhibited a moderate level of importance and exploration of external trends was less prevalent. Journey 2 was marked by a strong emphasis on competencies, with a focus on personal effectiveness, communication skills, and professional growth. Digital objectives were also prominent, while strategic projects and goals related to external trends were present but less dominant. In Journey 3, there was a balanced distribution between competency development and strategic projects. Digital and AI-related objectives were moderate in nature, with some goals addressing external trends and collaboration opportunities.

In BiNe, personal development is strongly fostered through the exchange and interaction with the BiNe-Team (RQ2). Approximately 85% of participants stated that the exchange within the BiNe-Team was highly valuable to them. Particularly positive aspects highlighted by participants were the heterogeneous composition of the team, which provided diverse perspectives, as well as the open and trusting nature of the exchange (see e.g., Augner et al. 2023, Graf et al. 2022 for similar findings on WOL). In addition, participants appreciated the combination of goal-oriented discussions and the content provided in the BiNe-Guide. Mutual support among team members, through the sharing of tips, experiences, and practical examples, was also frequently mentioned as a key contributor to personal development. Prior to the journey, participants rated their perceived preparedness for their professional future as an average of 3.8.\* After the BiNe-Journey, this rating increased to 4.0, indicating that participants felt better prepared to face upcoming professional challenges. According to participant feedback, this was achieved not only through the discussions with team members but also through the information and impulses provided in the BiNe-Guide.

Beyond skill development, participants repeatedly noted a shift in awareness. That is, through BiNe they became more conscious of the value of their own skills and experiences and recognised that these are worth sharing with others (see also Engelhardt & Warbeck, 2021; Graf et al., 2022; Wetterauer, 2020 for similar findings on WOL). Moreover, participants reported gaining a clearer understanding of how exchange and collaboration can support the achievement of their own goals, even when team members are pursuing different or seemingly unrelated objectives. Here is a selection of statements that illustrate the importance of the BiNe-Team for personal development:

- *"I like about BiNe that you form a team to reach your personal goals which have a positive effect on your work (but also private) life."* (J2-T1-04)<sup>†</sup>
- *"BiNe promotes the exchange between different institutions which helped me reach my personal goal."* (J2-T1-08)
- *"I was able to share my experience and knowledge and learnt that this was actually of use for others."* (J2-T1-11)

BiNe not only aims at promoting personal development but also places emphasis on fostering networking activities among participants. With respect to networking (RQ3), the majority of participants highlighted the importance of the BiNe-Team for achieving their goals, either directly through the provision of useful tips and advice or indirectly through encouragement, feedback and motivation.

\* All information refers to the number of completed questionnaires before (n=23) and right after the journey (n=19), not to the total number of participants in the three BiNe-Journeys conducted so far.

† The participant code is composed of the journey, the questionnaire and an arbitrarily assigned number.

Many participants further indicated that BiNe increased their awareness of the importance of networking (see also Wetterauer, 2020 for similar findings) and reinforced the perception that investing time and effort in building professional relationships is worthwhile. This indicates that the BiNe-Teams successfully established initial, small-scale networks that support participants in reaching their individual goals. Importantly, these networks, along with the strategy of leveraging networking for goal attainment, can serve as a foundation for continued relationship-building beyond the duration of BiNe. In the long run, this may enable the development of a CoP (see e.g., Foelsing & Schmitz, 2021; Hufnagel & Ternes, 2024; Ternes & Hufnagel, 2022 on the relation of agile learning and CoPs). By embedding networking within the learning process, BiNe contributes to the development of professional ecosystems characterised by openness, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, i.e., elements that are essential for addressing the complexity of contemporary educational environments.

Moreover, more than half of the participants felt more confident and competent when attending networking events after completing the BiNe-Journey. This finding suggests a positive influence of BiNe on networking skills. These skills include, among others, improved communication abilities (also in online communication), as well as an enhanced capacity to reflect on one's own role within professional networks. Participants also reported a greater awareness of the importance of actively sharing information and knowledge with others (see also Graf et al., 2022; Wetterauer, 2020 for similar effects of WOL).

In addition to skill development, participants engaged in reflective processes throughout the journey that allowed them to identify potential inhibitions related to networking, such as language barriers or contacting unknown people. With the support of their team and the guidance provided in the BiNe-Guide, many participants were able to address and overcome some of these barriers. This highlights the importance of both social support and structured learning materials in fostering networking competence and confidence. The selection of responses below illustrates the participants' perspectives on networking:

- *"BiNe has made me appreciate the value of networking more and I have taken more time for it."* (J1-T1-01)
- *"I am now more conscious of how I use my network."* (J2-T1-03)
- *"I think differently now about how I can use networking and that it's okay to ask for help because you're happy to offer it yourself."* (J1-T1-02)
- *"I now understand that I can easily hold informal conversations in German."* (J2-T1-04)
- *"I like the idea of having an easy-to-access network [BiNe-Team]."* (J2-T1-10)

The short-term effects observed at the macro level indicate that BiNe provides a structured and purposeful platform for fostering both personal development and networking among employees in educational institutions. Participants not only succeeded in achieving their individual goals but also contributed to the progress of others by sharing knowledge, expertise, and practical insights. This reciprocal exchange underscores BiNe's potential to generate collaborative learning processes that extend beyond the boundaries of individual tasks.

Within this context, the BiNe-Teams functioned as initial networking units, offering participants opportunities to analyse and reflect on their own professional behaviours while simultaneously addressing inhibitions related to networking. These teams created a safe and supportive environment in which participants could experiment with new interaction strategies, receive constructive feedback, and gradually build confidence in their networking abilities. Such experiences represent an important foundation for the emergence of a CoP, which constitutes a central long-term objective of the programme.

Despite these positive outcomes, participants also reported challenges associated with maintaining focus on individual goals throughout the ten-week duration of the journey. This timeframe, while designed to allow for iterative learning and habit formation, requires a considerable degree of commitment, time management, and organisational skills. These observations highlight the need for continued refinement of programme structures to balance flexibility with sustained engagement, ensuring that participants can derive maximum benefit without experiencing undue workload.

BiNe is designed to establish new routines that facilitate the achievement of individual goals. Recognising that the development and consolidation of such routines require time and repeated practice, the format adopts a ten-week timeframe for each journey. This duration is intended to provide sufficient opportunity for iterative learning and habit formation while maintaining a manageable scope for participants. Nevertheless, the programme is structured to avoid imposing additional burdens on participants' everyday work. On the contrary, its design seeks to ensure that engagement with BiNe yields tangible benefits that can be integrated into professional practice.

To support this objective, accompanying materials are continuously adapted from one journey to the next, enabling participants to maximise the value of their experience. Participants' feedback is actively considered, and materials are modified when changes are broadly beneficial for the group and future journeys. This iterative approach reflects a commitment to responsiveness and user-centred design, ensuring that the programme evolves in alignment with participants' needs and expectations. Such adaptability was particularly critical during the initial project phase, when foundational structures were refined to enhance clarity, usability, and practical applicability.

## 4 Conclusion and outlook

In light of rapid changes and limited resources, educational institutions need to strengthen their employees' individual competencies and establish collaborative structures across institutional boundaries. Agile learning formats support both aims by fostering personal development and collaborative learning. BiNe is an agile learning format tailored to the needs of employees in the educational sector. To date, the programme has been delivered three times, with more than 50 participants in total, in the Wissensstadt Heilbronn.

The findings indicate that participants pursue a range of individual goals. This heterogeneity of objectives ultimately highlights BiNe's distinctive strength: enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to foster mutual learning and achieve meaningful progress (RQ1). Personal development is further supported through exchange and interaction with the BiNe-Team (RQ2). Participants benefited from both the heterogeneous group composition and the material provided in the BiNe-Guide, which together increased the perceived preparedness for their professional future. They also developed a stronger awareness of the value of their skills and an understanding of how collaboration can support goal achievement, even when objectives differ. Furthermore, BiNe promotes networking by increasing awareness of its importance and strengthening participants' abilities to build and maintain professional relationships (RQ3). In doing so, it initiates small-scale networks that support goal achievement and can serve as a foundation for collaboration beyond the programme, and may potentially evolve into a CoP. Overall, the results suggest that agile learning formats such as BiNe create valuable impulses for professional development and cross-institutional collaboration.

BiNe relies fundamentally on the active engagement of its participants and the involvement of multiple educational institutions within the Wissensstadt, as these factors constitute the basis for establishing a stable and sustainable CoP. The long-term viability of such a community depends on continuous participation and the gradual expansion of its member base. Consequently, future iterations of BiNe aim to attract an increasing number of participants from all institutions of the Wissensstadt. The format is designed to accommodate both long-term employees and newcomers, thereby supporting the development of cross-institutional networks through the initiation of new contacts and the deepening of existing relationships. For this network to grow in a sustainable manner, broad participation is essential; only through collective engagement can the full potential of the initiative be realised, generating benefits for all stakeholders involved.

Resilient quality assurance is also required to establish BiNe in the institutions. To this end, the project is being scientifically monitored at the micro (individual development) and macro level (institutional level), analysing short- and long-term effects. Initial experiences with BiNe demonstrate the potential of agile learning formats for networking among educational institutions. In particular, the heterogeneous team composition and flexible structure proved to be success factors. Challenges remain in retaining participants in the long term and in the transition from the journey to a permanent

CoP. The findings may serve as examples of good practice beyond the educational institutions of the Wissensstadt.

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