



# Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Competence Utilization in Industrial Work During a Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The article studies the utilization of blue-collar industrial workers' competencies as part of organizational citizenship behavior in crisis situations. The research questions are: (1) How do workers perceive their opportunities to utilize their competencies in crisis situations? (2) How are the workers willing to utilize their competencies in crisis situations in terms of organizational citizenship behavior? The data used in the mixed-methods study comprise 983 survey responses analyzed by descriptive methods (quantitative data) and by theory-led content analysis (qualitative data). The findings indicate an imbalance between workers' opportunities to utilize their competencies and their willingness to do so in crises. Although workers are motivated to draw on their diverse skills and to apply new ideas in crises, the organizational culture does not sufficiently support the use of this potential. Accordingly, there is a need for a more participatory organizational culture empowering employees to contribute to organizational learning required in crises.

## KEYWORDS

*blue-collar workers / competencies / crisis situation / industrial work / organizational citizenship behavior / organizational learning*

## Introduction

Industrial companies in the Nordic countries and across Europe have encountered global crises from early 2020 onward. Especially the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine have severely affected many manufacturing companies and their operations. Finland is situated adjacent to Russia and was formerly a trading partner, with extensive industrial exports from Finland to Russia. However, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finland significantly curtailed its exports to Russia (Finnish Customs 2022), and most Finnish companies withdrew from Russia (Yle 2022; see also Ratten 2023). These operations caused numerous upheavals and crises in

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Finnish industrial companies engaged in operations in or cooperation with Russia. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have resulted, among other things, in an acceleration in inflation, a shortage of raw materials and components, and exceptional fluctuation in product demand. Industrial companies have been required not only to find ways to survive these crises but also to prepare for future disruptions.

In addition, broader trends in contemporary working life—such as technological change, increasingly dynamic job demands, and flatter organizational structures—call for the conceptualization of learning and development as a shared partnership between employers and employees, one that recognizes employees as proactive agents in managing their own growth (Dachner *et al.* 2021). In this article, we examine the role of blue-collar workers in this process by drawing on theories of organizational citizenship behavior and organizational learning.

In organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), employees are willing to enhance organizational performance based on their competencies (Podsakoff *et al.* 2000). Employee competencies can be valuable to organizations, especially in crisis situations. In this article, we analyze the utilization of the workers' competencies in crisis situations faced by Finnish industrial companies from the perspective of OCB. The research questions are (1) How do workers perceive their opportunities to utilize their competencies in crisis situations? (2) How are the workers willing to utilize their competencies in crisis situations in terms of OCB? By analyzing our survey data using descriptive methods and theory-led content analysis, we scrutinize the opportunities and willingness of industrial workers to utilize their competencies in crisis situations and analyze how these dynamics reflect OCB (Organ 1988; Organ *et al.* 2006). On the basis of this analysis, we discuss how OCB contributes to the organizational learning needed to survive a crisis.

OCB is defined as individual behavior for the benefit of the organization that is voluntary and not directly recognized by the formal remuneration system (Organ 1988; Organ *et al.* 2006, p. 3). Blue-collar factory work entails specific conditions that shape OCB: Workers' influence is not always assured, not even in Finland, where employees are generally more able to exert influence at work than in other European countries (Eurofound 2016; Melin & Saari 2021; Saari *et al.* 2022; Sutela *et al.* 2019, p. 115). Although prior research has examined OCB in blue-collar work contexts (e.g. Liang *et al.* 2023; Morton *et al.* 2019; Nuryanto *et al.* 2023; Oren *et al.* 2012; Piccoli *et al.* 2017), to the best of our knowledge, OCB among blue-collar workers has not been specifically studied in crisis situations.

By crisis situations, we refer to both major crises having a strong impact on the operations of companies and less severe exceptional situations faced by companies in their operations. Crisis situations, regardless of their scale, share a need for novel solutions, flexibility, and learning. Enabling employees' spontaneous actions and the creative application of their skills in crises can strengthen organizational learning, which is understood here as a collective learning process grounded in individual participation and shaped by organizational culture (Cook & Yanow 2011; Örtenblad 2001). Employees' willingness to proactively mobilize their human capital is therefore essential for fostering organizational learning, including in times of crisis.

Blue-collar work is often seen as highly supervised, routine work (Hennequin 2007). In earlier Taylorist organizations, the production process was broken down into small, precisely defined tasks to be performed by relatively unskilled workers under the supervision of managers and foremen. However, organizational flexibility now requires

workers to have broad competencies and understanding of the organization's processes (Boreham 2002) and even in more standardized blue-collar work unpredictable situations require problem-solving skills and creativity (Alam et al. 2022; Nakano et al. 2013; Saari & Koivunen 2022). Thus, especially in crisis situations, where the normal ways of organizing work may not apply, workers need to use their competencies.

The aim of this study is to examine individual workers' perceptions of their opportunities and willingness to proactively utilize their competencies in crisis situations. The ways companies involve their employees and utilize their skills in anticipating crisis situations, acting in them, surviving and learning from them are crucial in constructing resilience. Employee competencies play an essential role in understanding how organizations can manage disruptions and act in unexpected situations and adversity, mitigate the adverse consequences of the crises, and recover more rapidly or even emerge renewed and enhanced as a consequence of such challenges. In times of crisis, organizations rely on resilient organizational cultures that are sustained through employees' competencies and capabilities (Ateke & Nwulu 2018; Kendra & Wachtendorf 2003).

The present study offers four distinct contributions to the literature on OCB in industrial work. First, it addresses the under-researched context of blue-collar workers and their engagement in OCB. Second, it generates new insights into OCB and the utilization of competencies in crisis situations. Third, it adopts a mixed-methods research design, whereas prior studies on OCB have predominantly relied on quantitative approaches. Fourth, the study extends theoretical understanding of OCB by conceptualizing it as workers' willingness to utilize their competencies and by elucidating its relationship with organizational learning.

## Organizational learning in blue-collar work

The ability of organizations to learn and renew themselves is seen as part of organizational capabilities and cultural routines and practices, which, in turn, rely on a mix of personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (Evenseth et al. 2022; Lengnick-Hall et al. 2011). Organizational learning facilitates the transformation of individual knowledge into collective organizational knowledge (Basten & Haamann, 2018; Santos-Vijande et al., 2012). It is commonly defined as the process through which organizations adapt or transform their underlying assumptions, rules, procedures, and knowledge to sustain or improve overall performance (Chiva et al. 2014). From this perspective, organizational learning is fundamentally about participation rather than the mere acquisition of information (Örtenblad 2001).

According to the comprehensive literature review by Basten and Haamann (2018), approaches to organizational learning can be grouped into three domains: people, processes, and technologies. People-oriented approaches—such as senior–junior relationships, job rotation, and opportunities for informal interaction—emphasize interpersonal relationships and human dynamics. These strategies support learning through direct interaction, including observing experienced colleagues, engaging in guided reflection, and exchanging know-how among peers. Process-oriented approaches, including action learning, communities of practice, and cross-functional teams, focus on reflecting on successes and failures and on promoting learning within organizational processes. Technology-oriented approaches, in turn, leverage information systems to capture,



codify, and disseminate knowledge across the organization. Tools, such as knowledge repositories and collaborative platforms, facilitate the storage and sharing of explicit knowledge, enabling employees to access and apply organizational learning more effectively. As Basten and Haamann (2018) suggest, each of these approaches addresses different dimensions of learning, and their combined use can substantially strengthen organizational learning capabilities.

The elements of organizational learning articulated in Garvin's (1993) seminal work remain highly relevant, providing actionable guidance for organizations seeking to enhance their learning capacity. Garvin identifies systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from experience, learning from others, and knowledge transfer as key components of organizational learning. Building on this framework, Garvin *et al.* (2008) identify three overarching factors critical to organizational learning and adaptability: a supportive learning environment, well-defined learning processes and practices, and leadership behaviors that reinforce learning. Dachner *et al.* (2021) further argue that both general and firm-specific skills generate value for employers and employees, underscoring the importance of lifelong learning and proactive behavior for career success and organizational competitiveness. Organizations that intentionally and systematically manage learning processes tend to exhibit greater resilience and are better prepared to adapt to unexpected environmental changes and crisis situations (Garvin *et al.* 2008).

Prior research has shown that informal workplace learning among blue-collar workers in small and medium-sized enterprises—where formal training opportunities are often limited—is shaped by both individual and organizational factors. Key individual antecedents of learning include curiosity, a learning goal orientation, and self-directed learning, while organizational factors such as social support and time pressure also play a significant role (Decius *et al.* 2021). Many blue-collar workers lack formal education specific to their tasks; in Finland, for example, 72% of male industrial workers are employed in positions requiring specific vocational training, compared with 47% of female industrial workers (Anttila 2024, p. 41).

Consequently, many blue-collar workers acquire their skills primarily through on-the-job learning and work experience, through which they also develop tacit knowledge that supports problem solving (Saari & Koivunen 2022; see also Lundkvist & Gustavsson 2018). Although certain tasks in blue-collar work may be standardized, it is not possible to establish standardized procedures for all problems and situations (Alam *et al.* 2022). Unpredictable situations, such as crises, therefore, demand employees' problem-solving abilities and creativity (Nakano *et al.* 2013).

## **Utilization of employee competencies as a part of organizational citizenship behavior**

Organizational citizenship behavior is understood as individual behavior for the benefit of the organization that is voluntary and not directly recognized by the formal remuneration system (Organ 1988; Organ *et al.* 2006, p. 3). According to Organ (1997, p. 95), OCB is 'performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place' and refers to behaviors beyond those that must be performed (Organ 1988). As Podsakoff and colleagues (2009) point out, one reason for the vast interest in studying OCB is that it is expected to be positively related to measures

of organizational effectiveness (see also Dekas et al. 2013). The positive influence of OCB on organizational performance is based, for example, on more efficient utilization of resources, since employees help each other and create ideas to solve problems occurring in their work (Evans & Davies 2005; Podsakoff et al. 2000). They share their skills, expertise, and tacit knowledge—that is, their competencies—in the work community, which can result in more talented, flexible, and thus more productive workforce (Evans & Davies 2005; Kizilos et al. 2013).

Empirical studies have suggested that employees' OCB is related to several organizational factors. For instance, fair and participative leadership, organizational justice, and perceived organizational support have been shown to increase OCB (Hanaysha 2023; Kyei-Poku & Ying 2020; Obedgiu et al. 2020; Pohl et al. 2013). These findings imply reciprocity of OCB; the employees are willing to act for the benefit of the organization if they feel they are treated well and their efforts are valued by the employer (Pohl & Paillé 2011). In this study, we are interested in how industrial blue-collar workers manifest OCB in crisis situations, that is, in contexts in which the organization's survival depends on the mobilization of skills and ideas of all organizational members.

Organ (1988) introduced an OCB model consisting of five dimensions: altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship. He later (Organ 1990) added two other dimensions to the model: peacekeeping and cheerleading. *Altruism*, also known as helping, is an activity directed toward a specific individual, namely a co-worker, supervisor, or customer, who benefits immediately from this behavior. *Courtesy* is about preventing problems from occurring in the work, avoiding excess workload for co-workers, and making the work process smoother. *Conscientiousness*, also called compliance, entails agreeing to and complying with the rules, norms and constraints targeted at individuals as well as upholding the spirit of the organization. *Civic virtue* entails engaging in the governance processes of the organization in a responsible and constructive manner. *Sportsmanship* refers to not complaining and objecting to the changes the organization is compelled to make in order to adapt to the external circumstances (Organ 1988; Organ et al. 2006, pp. 18-24).

Podsakoff and colleagues (2000) have analyzed types of OCB identified in the research literature by focusing more on the potential of OCB in developing the work at both the individual and organizational levels. They regard conscientiousness defined by Organ (1988) as an 'individual initiative' dimension which includes employees' creativity and innovation to develop their own work or the performance of the organization as well as assuming extra responsibilities. Civic virtue, also one of the dimensions proposed by Organ (1988), may manifest among employees as participation in meetings, expressing opinions on organizational strategies, and taking part in discussions at the organizational level. The civic virtue dimension of OCB is seen also to include organizational participation (Graham 1991) referring to workers' interest in organizational affairs. Podsakoff and colleagues (2000) also propose developing oneself as one of the dimensions of OCB. Referring to George and Brief (1992), they point out that this dimension may, for example, include workers' willingness to learn new skills to make a bigger contribution to the organizational performance (Podsakoff et al. 2000). In this study, we focus primarily on the developmental dimension of OCB, which centers on the utilization of workers' competencies.



Van Dyne and colleagues (1995) argue that helping and compliance are affiliative behaviors which uphold existing task procedures and relationships between the members of the work community. In a turbulent business environment, employees are required to demonstrate higher levels of proactivity, flexibility, and innovativeness. Theoretizations focusing on individual behavior in the changing situations of organizations, such as making initiatives to solve problems and taking charge, are referred to as *change-oriented OCB* (Bettencourt 2004; Chiaburu et al. 2013; Choi 2007). Choi (2007) defines change-oriented OCB as ‘constructive efforts by individuals to identify and implement changes with respect to work methods, policies, and procedures to improve the situation and performance’ (adapted from Bettencourt 2004). Choi (2007) points out that both affiliative and change-oriented OCB are necessary for achieving high levels of organizational performance.

Dekas and colleagues (2013) have suggested that in modern working life, the organizations benefit from OCB which includes more knowledge sharing, that is, innovating and identifying new and better ways of working. However, the traditional OCB models, such as the original model introduced by Organ (1988), are also still applicable to the manufacturing industry, which is a more traditional type of a work environment than knowledge organizations (Dekas et al. 2013).

OCB has been studied in the contexts of various industries, including blue-collar work, since 1980s (Organ 2006; Smith et al. 1983). Recent studies in the blue-collar context have examined the relationship between OCB and other work-related factors, such as organizational commitment (Nuryanto et al. 2023), empowerment and job satisfaction in manufacturing teams (Morton et al. 2019), and organizational support perceived by workers (Liang et al. 2023). Piccoli et al. (2017) examined the connection between OCB and job insecurity in the context of paper industry work. Oren and colleagues (2012) studied associations between OCB and, for example, organizational justice of blue-collar workers in a large industrial company. These empirical studies on OCB in the blue-collar work context use a quantitative approach, while there is a shortage of qualitative studies on the topic.

## Data and methods

The research data consisted of responses to a Web survey on the actions of industrial workers in a crisis situation. The respondents were working in chemical, metal, and wood products industries and were active members of the Industrial Union of Finland. In Finland, union membership rates are high relative to most European countries: More than half (54.7%) of all salaried employees and unemployed persons are union members (Ahtiainen 2023, p. 35; Bergholm & Sippola 2022). In the Finnish manufacturing industry, the membership rate is even higher, as it was 63.4% in 2021 (Ahtiainen 2023, p. 40).

The survey was conducted by the Industrial Union of Finland, which served as a partner in the research project. The survey questions were developed collaboratively by researchers from the union and the research team of Tampere University. The survey was sent to 1960 industrial workers who were members of the workers’ survey panel of the Industrial Union of Finland in spring 2023, and 983 of them (50%) responded to the survey. Participants were informed of their rights in accordance with the European data protection regulations

and were promised anonymity in the reporting of data. The Industrial Union of Finland has about 200,000 members, of whom 76% men and 24% women. The majority of members are employed in the metal industry. (Industrial Union of Finland 2024). In our survey data, the majority of the respondents (72%) were men, and 73% worked in the metal industry (see Table 1). Thus, in terms of gender and industry distribution, the survey respondents provide a good representation of the broader union membership.

**Table 1** Respondents of the survey

	%	N
<b>Branch of industry</b>		
Chemical	15	147
Metal	73	715
Wood products	12	121
<b>Total</b>		<b>983</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	28	272
Male	72	711
<b>Total</b>		<b>983</b>
<b>Age</b>		
Under 35	10	94
35-45	26	255
46-55	38	374
Over 55	24	260
<b>Total</b>		<b>983</b>
<b>Company size (number of employees)</b>		
Under 50	38	342
50-250	40	352
Over 250	22	197
<b>Total</b>		<b>891</b>

The survey included 36 quantitative and six open-ended questions. The questions addressed topics such as flexible working arrangements, management, communication in crisis situations, and workers' opportunities and willingness to contribute by utilizing their competencies and ideas in crisis situations.

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. The first research question 'How do the workers perceive their opportunities to utilize their competencies in crisis situations?' was addressed through the quantitative analysis. The second research question 'How are the workers willing to utilize their competencies in crises in terms of organizational citizenship behavior?' was, in turn, elucidated by the qualitative analysis.

In the quantitative, descriptive analysis based on cross-tabulation and chi-square tests, the responses to the survey question about the opportunities of the workers to



utilize their competencies in crisis situations were analyzed in terms of the following variables: branch of industry, gender, and company size measured by the number of workers. The survey question included the following four sub-questions: (1) *Are you able to utilize your professional competencies extensively in your work?* (2) *Are you able to utilize your competencies and skills in crisis situations influencing production?* (3) *Do you have opportunities to apply new ideas in your work?* (4) *Would you have opportunities to apply new ideas in your work in crisis situations?* The answer options were (1) yes, (2) to some extent, and (3) no. These questions have not been used in this specific formulation in previous studies. However, measures addressing skills and competencies and their utilization at work have been widely employed in various forms (OECD 2010), as have measures related to problem solving (Eurofound 2019).

In the qualitative part of the study, we analyzed the responses to one open-ended question in the survey: *How would you be willing to utilize your competencies in crisis situations so that production in your workplace would continue as normally as possible?* There were altogether 369 responses to this question in the respondents' own words after the 'I don't know' responses were excluded. The responses were mainly relatively short, consisting mostly of one or two sentences. However, some respondents provided longer, more detailed responses, elaborating on their workplace circumstances and their willingness to contribute to organizational efforts.

The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, which is a systematic and replicable research method for recognizing and categorizing the meanings in the data relative to a particular context (Krippendorff 2019). The data were analyzed using a theory-led approach. The analysis was led by the theories of OCB focusing especially on the OCB dimensions presented in the research literature. Thus, the qualitative data were read in terms of these dimensions to analyze how they appear in the context of industrial work and in the expressions of the workers.

The qualitative analysis concentrated on the various ways in which the workers were willing to utilize their competencies during a crisis in terms of the OCB dimensions. The responses manifesting some of the OCB dimensions were first coded and then reread together with the other responses on the same theme and linked to specific OCB dimensions. In the analysis, the following five categories were formed: (1) *Responsibility for maintaining and developing the operations*, (2) *Flexibly helping and supporting co-workers and the work community*, (3) *Advising management and brainstorming*, (4) *Expanding one's responsibility for developing practices at the organizational level*, and (5) *Inability to utilize one's competencies in crises*.

## Findings

### Workers' opportunities to utilize their competencies and ideas in crisis situations

The quantitative analysis revealed that industrial workers' perceptions of their opportunities to utilize their skills and implement new ideas differed depending on whether these opportunities were considered in the context of everyday work in normal circumstances or specifically in crisis situations (see Table 2). Nearly half of the workers (47%) felt

that they were able to utilize a wide range of professional competencies in normal circumstances, whereas in crisis situations, this proportion declined to approximately one third of workers (35%). Less than one-third (31%) of the workers reported that they could apply new ideas in normal circumstances, and less than a quarter (24%) indicated that this was possible in crisis situations. Thus, in crisis situations, industrial workers perceived significantly fewer opportunities to utilize their expertise and apply new ideas compared to normal circumstances.

The best opportunities for using competencies and ideas, both in normal circumstances and in crisis situations, were reported in the chemical industry. These results were almost statistically significant, excluding opportunities to apply new ideas at work. The lowest level of opportunities was in the wood products industry. According to Anttila (2024, p. 40), workers in the Finnish wood products sector are more likely than those in other industries to report having no influence over their own work. Production processes in sawmills and panel mills are highly automated, a characteristic that limits workers' possibilities to exert influence (Anttila 2024, p. 40) and, consequently, may also restrict their opportunities to utilize their competencies and apply new ideas.

Men reported their opportunities to use competencies and ideas to be better than did women, both in normal and crisis situations, and these results were almost statistically significant or significant. This finding is consistent with the Finnish Working Life Barometer (Lyly-Yrjänäinen 2024, p. 100), which reports that men generally have substantially greater influence at work than women. This pattern has also been observed in industrial occupations specifically (Anttila 2024, p. 40). Being able to exert influence at work may also affect their opportunities to use their competencies and ideas. We further examined this gender gap by elaborating on the cross-tabulation of gender and opportunities to utilize competencies and apply new ideas by industry branch, in order to assess whether the observed differences were confined to specific sectors.

With respect to questions concerning competence utilization, this elaboration did not yield statistically significant differences because the conditions of the chi-square test were not fully met.

However, differences emerged in relation to opportunities to apply new ideas at work. The results of the elaboration were statistically significant in the chemical industry ( $p = 0.013$ ) and the metal industry ( $p = 0.012$ ), but not in the wood products industry. Regarding opportunities to apply new ideas in crises, a statistically significant result was observed only in the metal industry ( $p = 0.01$ ). Taken together, these findings indicate that gender differences in opportunities to apply new ideas in both 'normal' and crisis situations are not evident across all industries but are instead sector-specific.

Company size, measured by the number of employees in the organizations, was almost statistically significantly related only to the opportunity to apply new ideas at work: workers in small organizations with under 50 employees perceived their opportunities to apply new ideas in normal circumstances to be better than workers in larger organizations. For a crisis situation, the result was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that even in smaller industrial companies, the opportunities of the workers to utilize their competencies in crisis situations remain quite limited. This may imply that participative leadership, which is characteristic of a resilient organization (Kim 2021), is less applied in a crisis situation than in normal circumstances.

**Table 2** Opportunities to utilize professional competencies and to apply new ideas at work

		Yes %	To some extent %	No %	
<b>Opportunities to utilize professional competencies extensively/broadly at work</b>					
<b>Branch</b> <b>p = 0.021*</b>	Chemical	51	41	8	100
	Metal	48	40	12	100
	Wood products	33	54	13	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b> <b>p = 0.015*</b>	Male	50	39	11	100
	Female	40	49	11	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Company size</b> <b>(number of employees) p = 0.482</b>	Under 50	50	39	11	100
	50–250	48	41	11	100
	Over 250	43	47	10	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Opportunities to utilize professional competencies in crisis situations</b>					
<b>Branch</b> <b>p = 0.028*</b>	Chemical	43	42	15	100
	Metal	35	43	21	100
	Wood products	25	48	28	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b> <b>p = 0.003**</b>	Male	38	42	20	100
	Female	27	48	25	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Company size</b> <b>(number of employees) p = 0.834</b>	Under 50	36	45	19	100
	50–250	35	43	22	100
	Over 250	32	46	21	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Opportunities to apply new ideas at work</b>					
<b>Branch</b> <b>p = 0.239</b>	Chemical	32	50	18	100
	Metal	32	48	20	100
	Wood products	23	52	25	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

<b>Gender</b> <b>p = 0.001**</b>	Male	35	46	19	100
	Female	22	55	23	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Company size</b> <b>(number of employees)</b> <b>p = 0.016*</b>	Under 50	37	42	21	100
	50–250	28	52	20	100
	Over 250	28	55	17	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Opportunities to apply new ideas in crisis situations</b>					
<b>Branch</b> <b>p = 0.024*</b>	Chemical	26	55	19	100
	Metal	25	47	28	100
	Wood products	18	46	36	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b> <b>p = 0.001**</b>	Male	27	48	25	100
	Female	16	49	35	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Company size</b> <b>(number of employees) p = 0.200</b>	Under 50	28	47	25	100
	50–250	24	48	28	100
	Over 250	19	53	28	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>
Note: **p < 0.01 (statistically significant); *p < 0.05 (almost statistically significant)					

## Workers' willingness to utilize their competencies in crisis situations

### Responsibility for maintaining and developing the operations

In the qualitative analysis, we identified industrial workers who were willing to do their best in a crisis situation within the limits of their own work assignment. The workers were ready to adjust their own work to the changes in their work environment and thus contribute to improving the performance of the organization. The workers were prepared to take care of their duties as well as they could and to develop their own work. They were willing to modify their ways of working and create new ones and work more efficiently.

The workers were motivated to create solutions to problems occurring in their work. This was made possible by their accumulated experience, formal training, and practical skills. Kizilos et al. (2013) have regarded OCB as a means of involving employees in decision-making so that they are able to make decisions and solve problems quickly



and close to where they have emerged. This kind of employee involvement was seen to increase the performance of the organization (Kizilos *et al.* 2013). This could be critical, especially during a crisis, when there is a need for improved performance at the organizational level. To create solutions to problems on the grass-roots level, the workers were willing, for example, to find alternative suppliers during a crisis to enhance a smooth production flow. One worker described his capability to fix broken machines in a crisis situation due to his education:

I am also an electrician by profession so I can fix small electrical faults in the equipment myself. I've done that in a previous workplace as well. (metal industry, male)

Some of the workers highlighted their independence in their work. They perceived themselves as capable to make certain decisions on their own and work without direct supervision, which could be useful during a crisis. Many of them had a long work history and experience in previous crisis situations, which helped them to deal with these independently. They thus expected to alleviate the supervisors' workload as in the following case:

Years of expertise among the department's employees are very conducive to independent work. This allows the supervisor level to focus its energy on other departments. This way, we will reduce the pressure on management and on the employer. This has been proven to be possible in the coronavirus situation. (chemical industry, female)

Despite their independence, the workers adhered consistently to the rules and norms of the organization and to what was expected of them. For instance, they expressed their willingness to obey security orders issued by the employer and to implement the procedures that had been chosen by management to resolve the crisis. Therefore, the workers manifested conscientiousness, one of the dimensions of OCB (Organ *et al.* 2006). Their willingness to develop their own work and their creativity in solving problems also manifested a more developmental aspect of conscientiousness (Podsakoff *et al.* 2000). In addition, their motivation to reduce management's workload by working independently may be interpreted as courtesy, which is another of the OCB dimensions (Organ 1988).

### **Flexibly helping and supporting co-workers and the work community**

Whereas workers in the first category expressed willingness to utilize their competencies within the boundaries of their assigned tasks, those in the second category were willing to go beyond their usual work responsibilities to help co-workers during a crisis. They took the view that their flexibility was enabled by their diverse competencies and skills. The workers were willing to utilize their competencies related to the tasks of their own workplace, their training, as well as their expertise accumulated in previous crises to act in new crisis situations, as is articulated in the following quote:

Over the course of a long career, I have learned all the work tasks of my workplace. I can be reassigned to a number of tasks if necessary. (wood products industry, male)

The workers regarded themselves as ‘multi-skilled’ workers. They considered that their wide expertise would make it possible for them to move from one task or production machine to another and to replace absent colleagues. This kind of job rotation refers to people-oriented organizational learning (Basten & Haaman 2018). Some of the workers pointed out that the employer should be aware of workers’ competencies and capabilities in order to utilize them in crisis situations.

The following quote exemplifies the workers’ readiness to support the colleagues in coping with challenging circumstances:

By providing support and flexibility to professionals in different departments to ensure that the staff’s resilience and workload would remain sustainable. (metal industry, male)

Besides utilizing their current competencies, the workers in this category also expressed their readiness to learn new work tasks and do them flexibly by changing working methods. They were also willing to share their expertise by instructing and teaching their colleagues so that they would know how to act in a crisis situation. One worker expressed her motivation to contribute to the skills of others as follows:

By passing on my skills and knowledge to as many people as possible and preventing production from stopping. And so that no dangerous situations would arise due to incompetence or lack of knowledge (wood product industry, female)

By supporting colleagues and teams and trying to help them to cope with a crisis situation, the workers manifested altruism—one of the OCB dimensions named by Organ (1988). By flexibly switching work tasks, they were also able to reduce their colleagues’ workload, which may be interpreted as courtesy, one of the dimensions of OCB (Organ 1988).

### **Advising management and brainstorming**

Workers in the third category were willing, in crisis situation, to utilize their competencies at the organizational level by offering their expertise to management, thereby helping them to resolve the crisis. They hoped, for example, to contribute their competencies to planning groups and other groups established to manage the crisis. This way, they could participate in brainstorming new ideas collectively and in decision-making at the organizational level. One worker expressed his motivation to share his practical knowledge about the production process as follows:

I would be in working groups to consider how to continue production in abnormal conditions and to think about different scenarios and solutions to them. (chemical industry, male)

The workers in this category were willing both to collaborate with management and to provide guidance, as in the following case:

I would discuss and tell them [management] why any action needs to be taken. (metal industry, female)



In this category, the relation between the expertise of management and workers' personal competencies was significant. The workers thought that their point of view, based on their practical expertise, would benefit the decision-making process since it differed from management's viewpoint. According to the workers, managers did not always fully understand the practical implications of their decisions and directives at the operational level. Therefore, the workers could complement management's competencies in decision-making by acting as advisers by providing fact-based knowledge and by participating in finding new solutions. In this way, workers' tacit knowledge acquired through experience (Saari & Koivunen 2022) could be leveraged at the organizational level. One worker expressed the inadequacy of management's knowledge in addressing problems arising in day-to-day operational work:

Twenty-six years with the same employer - sometimes I have to educate and advise managers and designers. Young and knowledgeable in theory... but the practice is a bit different when doing the work. (metal industry, male)

Whereas the two previous categories mainly addressed the workers' practical activity, the responses in this category may, instead, be interpreted as a knowledge-based contribution by the workers to organizational performance. Regarding the OCB dimensions identified by Organ (1988), the workers expressed 'civic virtue', since they were willing to participate as advisers in the administrative processes of the organization, which is not part of their normal job description. In addition, the willingness of the workers to present their ideas for developing the organizational practices in a crisis situation refers to change-oriented OCB (Chiaburu *et al.* 2013).

### **Expanding one's responsibility for developing practices at the organizational level**

Whereas the workers described in the previous category were willing to brainstorm new ideas with the managers, those in this category sought to take an active role in implementing ideas in practice. They were willing to utilize their competencies to expand their job description to more demanding tasks and thus take more responsibility at the organizational level. The workers were concerned about the continuity of production during a crisis. Many of them seemed convinced that in order to survive a crisis it was necessary to develop the current organizational processes or create new ones, as in the following case:

I would try to run a few contingency plans for the employer to ensure uninterrupted continuity of work. (wood products industry, female)

Workers expressed their readiness to participate in administrative processes and in developing organizational practices such as reorganizing the production and rationalizing and optimizing the processes. This way, they would contribute to the performance of the whole organization. The workers made concrete suggestions, for instance, on how to develop the ways in which the tasks, employees, and production processes were organized, as the following quote exemplifies:

Production could be decentralized to different locations and/or carried out in pairs, with partners alternating seven days of work and seven days off. (metal industry, male)

Some of the workers criticized their superiors for not doing their managerial work properly. They wanted to compensate for inadequate management by taking more responsibility for managerial or administrative duties. For example, they expressed dissatisfaction with the communication between management and workers in crisis situations and wanted to improve it, as in the following case:

Especially during a crisis, interaction between management and employees is important. And that's the part I'd like to improve on, so that one wouldn't feel like there's just someone laying down the rules randomly. (metal industry, male)

The workers expressed confidence in their own abilities and skills to engage in the development of processes at the organizational level. Some of them reported having additional education, work experience, or qualifications, which would enable them to contribute to developmental tasks, such as degrees or training in engineering, pedagogy, or work safety. Similar to the workers described in the previous category, these workers also expressed civic virtue, one of the OCB dimensions (Organ 1988), since they were willing to take part in administrative processes. In addition, their motivation to implement changes in organizational policies and to develop the processes at the organizational level may be interpreted as change-oriented OCB (Choi 2007).

### **Inability to utilize one's competencies in crises**

Some workers expressed frustration over the lack of opportunities to utilize their competencies and implement their ideas in crisis situations. Similar to findings reported in previous categories, these workers articulated that they possessed education, skills, and experience that could have been valuable in managing crises. Nevertheless, based on their prior experiences, they were convinced that their competencies would remain unutilized in future crises as well. Although the workers had concrete ideas for improving production processes, management neither solicited nor showed interest in these suggestions. As a result, the workers felt that their competencies were neither acknowledged nor valued by management, as illustrated by the following quote:

The employer has made it clear that no ideas will be taken from an ordinary worker, meaning I can't do anything even if I wanted to. I have training and I also had enthusiasm. (metal industry, male)

For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, workers observed that decisions regarding the production processes were made by management without consulting employees. According to the workers, decision-making authority was thus concentrated at the managerial level, and they assumed that this pattern would persist in future crises. Due to the absence of opportunities to participate in crisis-related decision-making, many workers reported a loss of motivation to apply their competencies in such situations and consequently refrained from engaging in OCB (Organ 1988).



In addition, workers' roles, duties, and organizational positions shaped their opportunities to utilize their competencies. The workers described certain work roles as highly inflexible and restricted to narrowly defined tasks. For example, welders in the metal industry reported that their responsibilities were limited to producing a specific product, leaving them with no opportunity to influence the production process beyond their assigned tasks. Moreover, employees' positions within the organizational hierarchy substantially affected their ability to make their voices heard. Some employee groups had greater opportunities to influence decisions than others, as expressed in the following quote:

The hierarchy is heavy in a large factory, a worker's word is lighter than an engineer's word (metal industry, male)

As this quotation suggests, opportunities to utilize one's competencies varied even within the same organization, depending on prevailing organizational power structures. These structures were determined, among other factors, by differences in educational background and hierarchical status among organizational members.

## Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we analyzed industrial blue-collar workers' opportunities and willingness to utilize their competencies, especially in crisis situations in their workplaces, by focusing on the perspectives of the workers themselves. We interpreted the workers' expressions of their willingness to utilize their competencies as manifestations of their OCB (Organ 1988) and change-oriented OCB (Chiaburu *et al.* 2013; Choi 2007), which may contribute to the organizational learning.

Our first research question examined how workers perceive their opportunities to utilize their competencies in crisis situations. The quantitative analysis indicated that workers experienced fewer opportunities to utilize their competencies and apply new ideas in crises than in normal circumstances. This finding is concerning, as organizational resilience relies on the effective mobilization of all available resources, including employees' skills, knowledge, and creative input. Rather than marginalizing workers, organizations should actively leverage employees' competencies and ideas to support organization's ability to survive the crisis.

According to our findings, the workers in smaller companies, that is, those with under 50 employees, regarded their opportunities to apply new ideas in a normal situation as better than those working in larger firms. Companies of different sizes may have distinct organizational structures that influence the extent to which employees' competencies are utilized: In smaller companies, organizational hierarchies may be flatter than in larger firms, which can enable workers to participate more actively in decision-making processes (Hanaysha 2023). However, in crisis situations, although a slight difference between small and large companies was observed in our analysis, this difference was not statistically significant.

In our analysis, the branch of industry was statistically significantly associated with workers' opportunities to utilize their competencies, whereas company size was not. Notably, workers in the wood products industry reported fewer opportunities to utilize their competencies and apply new ideas, both in crisis situations and under normal

circumstances. Companies representing different branches of industry may have differing organizational cultures (Su et al. 2023), which can lead to variation in workers' opportunities to participate and exert influence: Some branches of industry may favor more participative decision-making practices than others. Moreover, we identified a concerning gender disparity in opportunities to utilize competencies and apply new ideas: women reported fewer such opportunities than men. However, this gender difference is not evident across all industries. Consequently, the position and experiences of women in industrial work warrant further scholarly investigation.

Our second research question examined workers' willingness to utilize their competencies in crisis situations in terms of OCB. Despite constraints on participation in crises, our qualitative analysis indicates that the workers were nevertheless largely willing to utilize their competencies in crisis situations. They favored different ways – the first four categories in our analysis – in which they were ready to use their competencies. The workers expressed the dimensions of OCB: altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, and civic virtue (Organ 1988). The fifth dimension proposed by Organ (1988), sportsmanship, was to be found in the first four categories formed in the analysis, since the workers were ready to take action to adjust to the circumstances instead of complaining and objecting to the changes.

The workers identified the first category, that of *responsibility for maintaining and developing the operations*, limited their participation quite strictly to their own work role and their work tasks. The workers manifested courtesy and conscientiousness (Organ 1988), behaviors that may foster and enhance organizational learning, although their overall impact remained quite limited: Focusing mainly on one's own work tasks is not likely to increase interaction between employees, which is essential in organizational learning (Basten & Haamann 2018).

In the second category, *flexibly helping and supporting co-workers and the work community*, the workers manifested the collective dimension of OCB, that is, altruism or helping (Organ 1988). By helping and supporting colleagues, the competencies of the workers could be spread across different departments. This process also entails interaction among employees and departments, and potentially across the organization as a whole; as such, it may contribute to enhanced organizational learning (Basten & Haamann, 2018).

The workers identified in the third category, *advising the management and brainstorming*, were willing to expand their work roles in a crisis situation and to offer their competencies for use in organizational decision-making. Thus, they expressed civic virtue, one of the OCB dimensions (Organ 1988) and also change-oriented OCB (Chiaburu et al. 2013; Choi 2007). By assisting management in broadening its perspective in crises, workers may enhance the organization's capacity for learning and renewal (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011).

In the fourth category of our analysis, *expanding one's responsibility for developing the practices at the organizational level*, the workers were willing to utilize their diverse competencies to increase the organization's ability to survive the crisis. As in the previous category, the workers manifested civic virtue (Organ 1988) and change-oriented OCB (Choi 2007). However, instead of only offering support to the management during a crisis, the workers were prepared to go even further and assume managerial responsibilities in addition to their own basic work tasks. The workers were willing to develop themselves and learn new skills for the benefit of the organization, which



also constitutes a component of OCB (George & Brief 1992; Podsakoff et al. 2000). In addition, the willingness of the workers to experiment with new ways of working could foster organizational learning required in a crisis situation (Hamel & Välikangas 2003; Välikangas & Romme 2013).

In the fifth and final category, *inability to utilize one's competencies in crises*, workers reported a loss of willingness to utilize their competencies because they perceived a lack of opportunities to influence decision-making, participate in resolving crises, or have their voices heard. Consequently, these workers did not manifest OCB. Their experiences may indicate a lack of a participative organizational culture that supports the effective utilization of employees' potential.

The findings of our analysis suggest that industrial workers perceived crisis situations as potential opportunities to foster a more participative and egalitarian organizational culture characterized by low hierarchical structures, in which their competencies could be recognized, valued, and utilized in resolving the crisis. However, the reality proved to be the opposite: in crises, decision-making became even more hierarchical and management-centered than in normal circumstances, and workers' competencies were utilized to an even lesser extent.

The findings indicate an imbalance between workers' opportunities and their willingness to utilize their competencies in crisis situations. Although workers possess diverse competencies that they are motivated to use in crises, organizational culture does not sufficiently support the utilization of this potential; consequently, organizational learning remains underdeveloped. Recent crises faced by European companies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have emerged abruptly, and organizational cultures may not have been sufficiently participative to respond effectively to these unprecedented circumstances. Our study underscores the need for more participative organizational cultures that enable workers to contribute meaningfully to collective organizational learning.

Providing workers with opportunities to utilize their competencies in diverse ways and to engage in collective idea generation is essential for enhancing learning in a turbulent environment and represents a key characteristic of a resilient organization (Välikangas & Romme 2013). By cultivating an organizational culture that enables employees to participate and collaborate in crisis resolution, organizations can facilitate learning from others and promote the transfer of knowledge across the organization (Garvin 1993; Garvin et al. 2008). This, in turn, strengthens the organization's capacity to address future crises. Moreover, enabling workers to contribute to organizational learning signals the employer's respect for workers' professional competencies.

## Limitations of the study

The respondents of the study were a selected group, as they were all trade union members and part of a voluntary survey panel. Therefore, it may be assumed that they held more positive attitudes towards work and were more willing to utilize their competencies than the average employee. Conversely, it is also possible that some individuals joined the panel in order to voice grievances. The survey data used in the analysis provided limited information on the factors underlying workers' willingness to utilize their competencies. To obtain more detailed insights into these factors, interview-based

studies with workers would be beneficial. In addition, the present study was confined to three branches of industry in Finland. Future research could employ larger international datasets to examine whether employees' opportunities to utilize their competencies differ across national contexts.

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