

# INDIVIDUALIZED EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH COACHING AND MENTORING: ASSESSING THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) emphasizes individualized approaches to employee learning and development (ILD), such as coaching and mentoring, and assigns key roles to line managers in HR processes. While both elements are recognized separately for their benefits, the joint impact of ILD and line managers' involvement (LMI) on overall company performance (CP), including productivity, innovation, and environmental effects, has not been extensively studied at the organizational level. This study investigates this relationship using data from a large-scale CRANET survey of 4145 medium and large companies across 38 countries. Utilizing Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling, the research tested a model examining the direct effect of ILD on CP and the mediating effect of LMI. The findings confirm a positive and significant direct relationship between individualized learning and development and company performance. The study also found that line managers' involvement positively mediates this relationship, which strengthens the effect. However, the analysis revealed that the direct effect of ILD on CP is substantially larger than the indirect effect mediated by LMI. These results provide clear direction for practitioners. Practitioners should incorporate individualized development methods, such as coaching and mentoring, while strategically leveraging managerial involvement to optimize business outcomes. Companies aiming to boost productivity, innovation, and environmental performance should include the implementation of ILD approaches. Simultaneously, they should support line managers in their HR roles as their involvement, although not the main driver, positively contributes to the overall impact.

**Implications for Central European audience:** For Central European audiences, the sources reveal a significantly lower use of individualized learning and development compared to global averages. The study highlights a strategic opportunity for companies in Central Europe to boost competitiveness and innovation through coaching and mentoring. Theoretically, the study confirms a direct link between ILD and organizational performance, followed by further practical implications driven by individualization in LD and the usage of i-

deals for increased engagement. Personalized development serves as the primary driver of improved performance.

**Keywords:** coaching; mentoring; individualized development; line managers; organizational performance

**JEL Classification:** M53, M55

## Introduction

The theoretical foundation of this research is built upon three key pillars within HRM: Individualized learning and development, Line managers' involvement, and Company performance. Previous research has often explored these elements separately or focused on their impact at the individual employee or manager level. While studies have looked at individualization (like i-deals) and the role of line managers, their joint impact on complex organizational performance at the organizational level has not been extensively studied or sufficiently assessed.

The study is even more relevant in the context of the European Year of Skills 2023, where mentoring was stated as one of the sources for future growth within European countries. The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) adopted at its plenary session an opinion on mentoring. In its opinion, the CoR describes mentoring as "a powerful and meaningful tool" for many parts of the population – including entrepreneurs – and argues that mentoring has demonstrated its positive effects in terms of personal and professional empowerment and civic engagement, success rates, access to employment and the fight against social and economic inequalities (COR EUROPA, 2023). The concept of coaching was introduced to Western Europe in the 1980s as an emerging trend originating from the United States, where it had primarily evolved within the context of sports. Its subsequent development has been shaped by the cultural frameworks of individual countries, with national variations influencing both the interpretation and the application of coaching practices (Passmore, 2008). The leading style in Central Europe can be described as moderately direct, focused on the power of the individual but with high integration of social and systematic thinking; still in the growth phase on the market, widely accepted as a business tool in its solution-focused approach (Honsová, 2020). This indicates an opportunity for Central European countries to enhance their practices through the application of individualized learning and development strategies. Furthermore, our study identified a significant difference in the use of ILD between Central European countries (Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) and the rest of the world. Respondents from Central European countries reported significantly lower engagement with ILD practices. This finding highlights a critical developmental gap and a strategic opportunity for these countries to enhance workforce competitiveness through broader application of ILD. These results further justify the relevance and importance of our research for the Central European context.

**The individualized approach** in HRM is a current trend in people management, triggered and inspired by societal changes (Bal & Lub, 2018). Personalised HRM represents a new generation of HRM that is implemented at an individual level and provides tailored solutions (Huang et al., 2023). According to Huang et al. (2023), personalised HRM represents a unique source of a company's sustainable competitive advantage and offers additional

beneficial effects on performance. Its positive effects are highlighted by several studies (Caliskan & Torun, 2019; Hornung et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2023; Rofcanin et al., 2022). Organizations tailor their HR processes and tools to the needs and interests of employees concerning their current career and life stage. Such an approach brings many positives for both organisations and their employees. A tool for its implementation is the conclusion of so-called idiosyncratic agreements (i-deals), which allow for an individualized approach to job design, employee development, and compensation (Rousseau et al., 2009).

The role of i-deals in the learning, development, and career shaping of employees has been highlighted by several studies (Bhawna et al., 2024; Srikanth et al., 2022; Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). Employees are interested in negotiating employment contracts tailored to their needs to gain access to critical development roles (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Rousseau et al., 2006). When it comes to so-called developmental i-deals, these are special opportunities for skill acquisition and advancement (Hornung et al., 2010). Skill development through on-the-job experience can be crucial for career success (Srikanth et al., 2022). Coaching and mentoring appear to be an attractive form of on-the-job learning concerning the needs of the new generation of employees.

**Knowledge** is now becoming one of the most important sources of organizational success (Akyel, 2018).

In most organizations today, **line managers** play a key role in implementing HRM practices (Bos-Nehles et al., 2020). The delegation of responsibility for HRM processes to line managers is seen as a key feature that distinguishes HRM from traditional personnel administration, and is particularly significant in strategic HRM, which seeks to align people management with the goals of the organisation (Brewster et al., 2015). Line managers are often the source of employees' direct experience of an organization's HR practices, yet their critical role in the process of HRM practice delivery is often overlooked (Kehoe & Han, 2020). It is therefore important to examine the real-world effects of their involvement in HR processes on businesses.

The aim of our study is important for several reasons. Much previous research has addressed the individualization approach in HRM, i-deals theory of action (Rofcanin et al., 2018; Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau et al., 2006, 2009), employee development through on-the-job experience (Srikanth et al., 2022) as well as the role of line managers in HRM (Bondarouk et al., 2018; Bos-Nehles et al., 2020; Brewster et al., 2015; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018). However, their mechanisms and effects are mainly explored at the level of the employee and the manager as their actors. An important contribution of our study is to examine their joint effect on complex organizational performance. Assessing the impact of ILD with LMI on business outcomes in a global sample of 4,145 medium and large organizations may yield important findings towards adjusting HR processes concerning the new generation of employees to support business performance. It is the size and global nature of the research sample that allowed us to examine the impact of ILD on complex corporate performance, which has not been sufficiently assessed to date and which we consider an important contribution to our research.

Our study examines how the individualized approach to employee learning and development by using coaching and mentoring affects the performance of medium and large organizations, concerning the mediating effect of line managers' involvement in HR processes. In doing so,

we take a system or multi-stakeholder perspective (Colakoglu et al., 2006). The higher contribution of our study lies in explicit examination of the proposed linkages *between* these pillars at the organizational level.

## 1 Hypothesis development

### 1.1 Individualized Learning and Development in HRM: Tools and Trends

Idiosyncratic agreements (i-deals) are a tool for implementing individualized HRM in organisations. I-deals are generally the terms and conditions of employment that individuals negotiate to reflect their needs and reflect their current personal life and career stage. They come in a variety of forms, ranging from flexible schedules and working conditions to career development (Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau et al, 2006). I-deals are not entirely new to HRM, but changing labour market conditions have opened access to them to a wider range of workers (Rousseau, 2001). I-deals have become easier to negotiate as employers face market pressures to attract and retain talent (Cappelli, 2000). In economically challenging periods, i-deals can even compensate for stagnant wages by providing inexpensive ways to motivate and reward workers (Rousseau et al., 2009). I-deals can also be used to improve the quality of employment (Rousseau et al., 2009).

I-deals offer tailored or person-specific solutions; they are not conceptualized as tools to increase competition in the allocation of scarce resources among employees (Rousseau et al., 2009). They are based on the humanistic idea that there are parameters of the workplace that can be adjusted to suit different needs and preferences arising from individuals' personal situations, aspirations, and lifestyles (Hornung, 2018).

One of the areas where i-deals are finding application is in employee learning and development. In the context of sustainable careers, i-deals are considered highly valuable because they can help individual employees adapt more easily to the rapidly changing environment that currently characterizes society and the labor market (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021). They also serve as a strategic tool to meet both employers' and employees' career goals by helping to align the strategic goals of the organization with the goals of individual employees (De Vos & Cambré, 2017). In doing so, they respect the dual responsibility of enhancing an employee's career potential (Van Der Heijden et al., 2018). Gvaramadze bases the necessity of seeking flexibility and an individualized approach in employee development on the pressure on businesses in the battle for talent and declining retention (Gvaramadze, 2008). The need to tailor employee development to their individual needs stems from changes in the labour market with increasing pressure for empowerment in employee career design, i.e., shifting the responsibility for development to the employee as both a necessity and an advantage, enabling the creation of individual career paths.

The learning and development tools available to organisations in this context are coaching and mentoring. These are developmental approaches based on the use of one-to-one conversations to improve an individual's skills, knowledge, or job performance (CIPD, 2024). Coaching involves a relationship between a coach and an employee where the coach provides support, feedback, and guidance in achieving personal and professional goals (Theeboom et al., 2014). Mentoring, on the other hand, is a longer-term relationship between a more experienced mentor and mentee where the aim is to provide guidance and inspiration

in developing their potential (Eby et al., 2013). The combination of coaching and mentoring in employee development brings significant benefits for sustainable organizations (Andrianto & Supardi, 2023).

Coaching and mentoring approaches provide individualized support that enables employees to develop personally and professionally (Khakwani et al., 2012; Passmore, 2021). By their very nature, they respect and respond immediately to an employee's individual needs and situation. The principles of coaching and mentoring are being implemented by an increasing number of employers as part of an overall learning and development strategy. Building a coaching culture in the workplace presupposes the active participation of employees themselves as well as their managers, and thus becomes a tool to support continuous ILD.

## **1.2 Defining and Measuring Company Performance in HRM Research**

HRM performance results can be captured in a variety of ways. Dyer and Reeves (1995) suggest measuring financial outcomes (e.g., profits, sales, market share), organizational outcomes (e.g., productivity, quality, efficiency), and human resource outcomes (e.g., employee attitudes and behaviours, satisfaction, commitment, and intention to leave). According to Boselie et al. (2005), up to half of the studies have traditionally used financial indicators to measure HRM performance, with profit being the most represented indicator, followed by various revenue indicators. Focusing attention primarily on the financial performance of organisations as an indicator of the effectiveness of HRM initiatives may be too simplistic and is no longer sufficient due to the changing nature of work and the need to satisfy multiple stakeholders (Colakoglu et al., 2006). In our study, is the HRM performance measured through its impact on productivity, innovation, and environmental performance of companies (Huang et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2021; Van De Voorde et al., 2016).

### **HRM's Impact on Productivity: Understanding the Mediated Effect**

Some authors question the possibility of measuring the impact of HRM on business productivity outcomes due to the large distance between investments in individual HRM practices and business outcomes (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013). Investments in HRM practices have an impact on employees, and they move the business toward success through their work. Thus, the effect on higher productivity is mediated. Proving or calculating the effect of these investments is difficult due to the poor use of HR analytics (Davenport et al., 2010) as well as the poor ability to articulate the overall results of HRM initiatives (Colakoglu et al., 2006). Isolated initiatives have a difficult-to-measure effect.

In our study, we take a systems perspective, which allows us to integrate the bigger picture and involves assessing the impact of the effectiveness of HRM initiatives on productivity and innovativeness so that it is not achieved at the expense of other stakeholders. Our object of interest is intended HRM, which refers to the HRM system or practice and procedures that companies' leaders seek to put in place to enhance companies' performance (Wright & Nishi, 2013). The link between HRM systems designed at the strategic level and firm performance has been confirmed by several researchers (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005). According to Huang et al. (2023), it is HRM that represents a unique source of a company's sustained competitive advantage and offers beneficial effects on performance. It outperforms traditional HRM in terms of productivity, favourable HR climate, flexibility, return on investment in HRM, and companies' financial performance (Huang et al., 2023).

## **Fostering Innovativeness through HRM and Employee Engagement**

The literature on the impact of HRM on a CP currently emphasizes the strategic contribution of HRM in the areas of new product development, creativity, and talent (Seeck & Diehl, 2017; Smith, 2018; Stokes et al., 2019). This is based on their mutual "complementarity", which enables organisations to innovate through an approach focused solely on HRM practices (Sardi et al., 2020).

The impact of HRM initiatives on employee innovativeness is through the HRM affecting employee engagement (Van De Voorde et al., 2016). HRM, through employee empowerment initiatives (increased job variety, job autonomy, and development opportunities), influences the growth of employee engagement. Engaged employees bring higher added value, have higher energy at work, and are more enthusiastic in their work (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

### **HRM's Role in Corporate Environmental Performance**

With the emergence of the ESG concept, the impact of HRM on companies' environmental performance is also increasingly discussed (Ren et al., 2021). It has been shown that HRM systems can influence employee attitudes, such as employee commitment (Jiang et al., 2012). HRM has various practices such as using environmental attitudes and skills as criteria for hiring, environmental training programs, rewarding employees for achieving environmental goals, and engaging employees in finding more sustainable ways of working (Ren et al., 2021). Such practices are implemented as a system to shape environmental behaviours in employees, i.e., to develop the skills needed to make decisions and take actions that are environmentally friendly.

Environmental measures also include the support of remote work, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of the company (Billio et al., 2021). In this regard, HRM takes care not only to encourage employees to reduce commuting but also to ensure organisational support for hybrid or remote work arrangements, making it highly productive and with minimal impact on both employee and employer satisfaction.

### **The Direct Link Between Individualized Learning and Development and Company Performance**

Creating opportunities for employees to learn and develop their knowledge and skills is an important factor in enhancing the performance of organisations (Ibidunni et al., 2020; Wallo et al., 2022). Learning promotes innovation, increases productivity and HR flexibility (Noe et al., 2014), and also influences employee job satisfaction (Cerasoli et al., 2018). Several studies confirm that, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was the ability to learn and innovate that was a key factor in successful organizational change strategies. Opportunities for on-the-job learning can therefore be considered a key factor for both individual and organizational sustainability (Elg et al., 2015).

The effects of coaching and mentoring as individualized learning and development tools on overall performance (Bourg et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2016; Neupane, 2015) and organizational sustainability (Andrianto & Supardi, 2023; Eby et al., 2013; Garvey & Stokes, 2022) have been confirmed by several studies. According to a study (Al Hilali et al., 2020), coaching and mentoring play a vital role in developing competencies and the sustainability of their maximum use in service organizations operating in any industry. By providing support and guidance to employees, organizations can ensure that they have the necessary

knowledge, skills, and attitudes to contribute to environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Andrianto & Supardi, 2023).

Based on the above, we hypothesize that if management formally integrates coaching and mentoring tools within the learning and development system, which inherently respect the individual needs of employees, both private and career-related, and adapts the choice of tools to them, this will have a significant impact on the company's performance in the form of productivity growth and innovation. Based on the above, we formulate hypothesis H1.

- **H1:** We assume that there is a positive effect on CP achieved by the company supporting ILD initiatives, and that there is a positive association between ILD and CP.

Hypothesis H1 posits a direct positive relationship between ILD initiatives (specifically coaching and mentoring) and CP. This moves beyond examining individual-level outcomes of coaching/mentoring to hypothesize a direct organizational-level impact.

### **1.3 Line Managers' Central Role in HR Implementation: Capabilities and Challenges**

According to Brewster et al. (2015), one of the fundamental principles of contemporary HRM is the delegation of some responsibilities to line managers, who are the key actors in their implementation. It has been shown that the implementation of HR practices is more effective when it is done with the involvement of line managers (Andreeva et al., 2023; Boehme et al., 2023). Therefore, many scholars agree that line managers are central to the HRM implementation process (Bondarouk et al., 2018; Bos-Nehles et al., 2020; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018) and that the implementation of practices is as important to HRM effectiveness as their formulation and design (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). The line managers can contribute to the effective implementation of HRM systems by using their cognitive and political skills to make decisions under specific conditions (López-Cotarelo, 2018). They have direct contact with employees and therefore could understand and respond quickly to their needs (Brewster et al., 2015).

When it comes to training and development of employees and managing their careers, line managers are heavily involved in shaping practices for their team members as well as implementing them (Wright & Nishi, 2013). One form of supporting employees through individual development is the use of the line manager's coaching approach in management. The individualized "manager as coach" approach is implemented in the career and work support of employees (Beattie et al., 2014; Ben-Hador, 2024). The manager actively works to improve the skills, competencies, and performance of subordinates to increase their self-awareness, self-directed behaviour, and personal growth (Adele et al., 2023), while encouraging their work engagement (Carrell et al., 2022). It has been shown that differences in the approach to using coaching can affect the satisfaction and engagement of employees (Kilroy et al., 2023). Many studies that have examined the relationships between managers who use coaching and their subordinates (Adele et al., 2023; Carrell et al., 2022; Kim & Kuo, 2015; Milner et al., 2018) point to the positive value of the "manager as coach" which is reflected in improved performance (Lyons & Bandura, 2023), work attitudes (Milner et al., 2020), and turnover rates (Omar & Ramdani, 2017).

Line managers also use a mentoring approach to support employees' career and personal development, allowing them to turn to mentors for advice and individual support (Hu, 2022). Mentoring helps to develop employees' skills, supports their career progression (Allen & Eby, 2004; Lyle & Smith, 2014), and positively influences job satisfaction, which is reflected in the reduction of turnover (Haggard et al., 2011).

However, the process of implementing HRM with LMI involves two seemingly contradictory dimensions, placing increased demands on line managers. On the one hand, consistency – the need to set clear rules and treat team members equally; on the other hand, individual orientation – considering individual differences in performance and needs (Fu et al., 2020).

Although the role of line managers in HRM processes is widely acknowledged, research and theory lag in this regard (Beer et al., 2015). Filling this gap is important because any consideration of HRM effects must consider actual practices that line managers practice (Wright & Nishi, 2013).

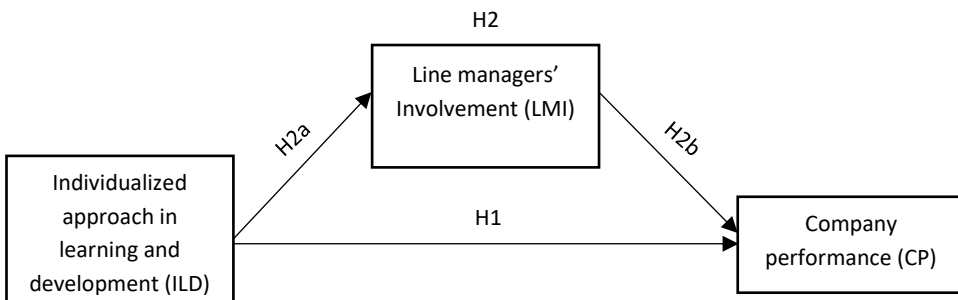
We assume that individualized employee learning and development will result in increased company performance, with this effect being positively and partially mediated by the inclusion of line managers in HR processes.

- **H2:** We hypothesize that line managers, through their direct interactions with employees and their responsibility in enacting HR practices, significantly shape the effectiveness of ILD initiatives. Specifically, we propose that ILD creates an enabling environment for greater LMI in HR processes. By facilitating more targeted and responsive employee support, this increased involvement is expected to enhance CP.

Hypothesis H2 proposes that LMI in HR processes positively mediates the relationship between ILD and CP. This is the core integration, testing how the active participation of line managers influences the effectiveness of individualized development initiatives in driving overall organizational results. The theoretical model explicitly visualizes this mediated pathway alongside the direct one. For the mediation hypothesis (H2) to be confirmed, both of the following conditions must hold. ILD must have a significant effect on LMI (H2a), and LMI must have a significant effect on CP (H2b).

The theoretical model of our study is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 | The theoretical model of the study**



Source: Authors' own elaboration

# 2 Methods

## 2.1 Data and sample

As part of the CRANET network, we participated in the research and gained access to the collective survey data used in this study. CRANET is an international research network that conducts scientific data collection on strategic HRM in a global context. Our study is based on the largest and most comprehensive dataset on HRM, including key HRM practices (i.e., recruitment, selection, compensation and benefits, career management, and performance appraisals), the organization of the HRM function (e.g., outsourcing, devolution to line management, use of technology to deliver HRM). The survey is conducted regularly and provides a large-scale, multi-time-point, cross-national data (Parry et al., 2021). For a more detailed description of the questionnaire survey methodology, see Brewster (Brewster et al., 2004). Data collection was carried out in 2021–22 on organizations with over 100 employees from 38 countries around the world.

For each round of the survey, questions are constructed by network members to ensure consistency in data comparisons between periods, but at the same time, capture emerging trends in the field. Each question is based on a literature review, the researchers' expert perspective, and discussions with HR professionals. Data collection is cross-country, concerning sectors and firm sizes to ensure the representativeness of the samples. The return rate of the questionnaires is approximately 25%. The research data are widely accepted for publishing research outputs internationally (Einarsdóttir et al., 2018; Christensen et al., 2019; Peretz et al., 2018; Prince et al., 2020; Szierbowski-Seibel et al., 2019).

For our study, we focused on medium and large companies with 250 or more employees. The research sample comprised 4,145 companies from 38 countries. A detailed breakdown of the sample, including the number of companies per country, is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1 | Characteristics of the research sample**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of companies</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of companies</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of companies</b>
<b>Australia</b>	45	<b>Germany</b>	310	<b>Romania</b>	117
<b>Austria</b>	189	<b>Greece</b>	153	<b>Serbia</b>	69
<b>Belgium</b>	43	<b>Hungary</b>	108	<b>Slovakia</b>	64
<b>Bosnia</b>	26	<b>Iceland</b>	49	<b>Slovenia</b>	68
<b>Brazil</b>	143	<b>Israel</b>	56	<b>Spain</b>	166
<b>Canada</b>	106	<b>Japan</b>	103	<b>Sweden</b>	467
<b>Chile</b>	8	<b>Latvia</b>	23	<b>Switzerland</b>	137
<b>China</b>	207	<b>Lithuania</b>	36	<b>Turkey</b>	69
<b>Croatia</b>	98	<b>Mexico</b>	250	<b>UK</b>	190
<b>Cyprus</b>	21	<b>Nepal</b>	45	<b>USA</b>	230
<b>Denmark</b>	174	<b>Netherlands</b>	68	<b>Uzbekistan</b>	49
<b>Estonia</b>	33	<b>Norway</b>	105	<b>Venezuela</b>	10
<b>Finland</b>	67	<b>Poland</b>	43		

Source: Authors' own elaboration

To assess the difference between Central European countries and the rest of our sample, we conducted a t-test on the estimated ILD scores. The results indicated that Central European countries had significantly lower predicted ILD values ( $t(258) = 2.24, p = 0.026$ ), highlighting an opportunity for improvement and further supporting the rationale behind our research focus.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of our sample, including the frequencies of the measured variables.

**Table 2 | Frequencies of measured variables**

Individual approach in learning and development							
Counts	N	Missing	Not at all 0	1	2	To a very great extent 3	
ILD1	3350	795	762	1193	885	510	
ILD2	3344	801	749	1112	927	556	
Performance level compared to others							
Counts	N	Missing	Poor	Below average	Average	Better than average	Superior
CP1	3635	510	30	179	1150	1577	699
CP2	3607	538	95	409	1142	1241	720
CP3	3494	651	80	285	1268	1151	710
Primary responsibility for HR functions							
Counts	N	Missing	Line-Man	Line-Man in consultation with HR	HR in consultation with Line- Man	HR Department	
LMI1	4092	53	724	1246	1251	871	
LMI2	4103	42	501	1486	1366	750	
LMI3	4093	52	590	1188	1486	829	

Note: The abbreviations of the variables are explained in Table 3.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

We developed the theoretical model (Figure 1) based on a comprehensive literature review and tested it using covariance-based structural equation modelling. To perform the analysis, we used the *R* with *Lavaan package* (Rosseel, 2012), *semTools* (Jorgensen et al., 2018), and *Stata* (StataCorp, 2023) software. We applied the maximum likelihood estimator for our structural equation model analysis due to its widespread use and its robustness properties. For parameter optimization, we used the NLMINB algorithm (Gay, 1990), which enables robust parameter estimation. We used this approach as it resulted in the best model fit among available methods. The complex model was further adjusted to include only those variables providing the best overall fit.

We assessed the model fit using multiple indices that are recommended for SEM CB evaluation (Fan et al., 1999; Hu & Bentler, 1999). We included the Chi-Square Test of model fit, Comparative fit index, Tucker-Lewis fit index, Root mean square error of approximation, Standardized root mean square residuals, and coefficient of determination. This allowed us to have a comprehensive model fit evaluation. To further evaluate the model, we used

Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, Average variance extracted, and path coefficients' magnitude and significance.

## 2.2 Measurements

**The use of an individualized approach** in staff learning and development was measured by a question in the staff development section. Respondents were asked to what extent they use Coaching and Mentoring in their company to develop employees and manage their careers. To capture the extent of use of each method, responses were scaled from 0 (0 = Not at all) to 3 (3 = To a very great extent).

**The company's performance** is a question from the overall organizational data section. Respondents were asked to compare the performance of their own company with other companies in the sector by answering on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Poor or at the low end of the industry, 2 = Below average, 3 = Average or equal to the competition, 4 = Better than average, 5 = Superior) in each of the company performance areas such as productivity, innovativeness, and environmental issue.

**The line managers' involvement** was measured in the section focusing on the general management of HR activities. The question focused on making major decisions in particular areas of HR work, such as employee compensation, recruitment and selection, training and development. To capture the level of involvement of line managers in HRM activities, a scale from 1 to 4 was chosen (1 = Line management, 2 = Line management in consultation with HR department, 3 = HR department in consultation with line management, 4 = HR department). An overview of the variables and the sources from which they were selected is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3 | Selected parameters and the literature research**

<b>Individual approach in learning and development (ILD)</b>	Use of individual approach in learning and development	ILD1 coaching for development or career management ILD2 mentoring for development or career management	(Passmore, 2021; Van Der Heijden et al., 2021; Theeboom et al., 2014; Gvaramadze, 2008)
<b>Company's Performance (CP)</b>	Performance level compared to others	CP1 level of productivity CP2 rate of innovation CP3 environmental matters	(Huang et al., 2023; Van De Voorde et al., 2016; Ren et al., 2021)
<b>Line managers' involvement (LMI)</b>	Responsibility for HR functions	LMI1 primary responsibility for major policy decisions on pay and benefits LMI2 primary responsibility for major policy decisions on recruitment and selection LMI3 primary responsibility for major policy decisions on training and development	(Andreeva et al., 2023; Ben-Hador, 2024; Boehme et al., 2023; Lombardi et al., 2020; Lyons & Bandura 2023)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

## 3 Results

In the results section of our paper, we present the findings of our measurement model, structural model, and mediation analysis, which are ultimately illustrated in a path diagram.

A detailed description of our measurement model is provided in Table 4. All factor loadings were statistically significant, confirming that the measured variables effectively represent their respective latent constructs. The model demonstrates acceptable reliability and validity within the context of our research; however, the CP variable exhibits weaker reliability and a lower AVE.

**Table 4 | Measurement model**

Construct	Items	Description of Items	FL	SE	P-value	CA	CR	AVE
<b>Individual Approach in Learning and development (ILD)</b>	ILD1	Coaching for development or career management	1.000			0.771	0.774	0.635
	ILD2	Mentoring for development or career management	0.880	0.059	<0.001			
<b>Company Performance (CP)</b>	CP1	Rating of level of productivity	1.000			0.686	0.693	0.430
	CP2	Rating of rate of innovation	1.352	0.055	<0.001			
	CP3	Rating of environmental matters	1.041	0.043	<0.001			
<b>Line Managers' Involvement (LMI)</b>	LMI1	Who has primary responsibility for major policy decisions on pay and benefits?	1.000			0.745	0.746	0.505
	LMI2	Who has primary responsibility for major policy decisions on recruitment and selection?	1.175	0.041	<0.001			
	LMI3	Who has primary responsibility for major policy decisions on training and development?	1.111	0.039	<0.001			

Note: FL – factor loadings, SE – standard error, CA – Cronbach's alpha, CR – McDonald's omega, AVE – Average variance extracted

Source: Authors' own elaboration

After assessing the goodness of fit indices our model shows a good fit to the data with following results  $\chi^2 = 48.907$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $CFI = 0.995$ ,  $TLI = 0.992$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.023$ ,  $SRMR = 0.013$ ,  $CD = 0.800$ , as it indicates an overall good fit, good residual fit, and strong explanatory power. While the Chi-Square test result was not optimal ( $p < 0.05$ ), this limitation is common in large sample sizes such as the one used in this study. The structural model is further described in Table 5.

**Table 5 | Structural model**

Path	Hypothesis	Coefficient	Standard Error	z-value	p-value	Result
<b>ILD → CP</b>	H1	0.203	0.019	10.98	<0.001	Supported
<b>ILD → LMI</b>	H2a	0.106	0.017	6.32	<0.001	Supported
<b>LMI → CP</b>	H2b	0.081	0.021	3.86	<0.001	Supported

Note: *ILD = Individual Approach in Learning and development; CP = Company performance; LMI = Line Manager Involvement*

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Our model shows a significant impact of the individual approach on the company performance ( $\beta = 0.203$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) supporting our H1 hypothesis. Applying the individual approach to learning and development via coaching and mentoring could affect companies' increased performance in productivity, innovation, and environmental matters.

Our model shows a significant impact of the individual approach on the line manager involvement ( $\beta = 0.106$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) supporting our H2a hypothesis. The involvement of line managers increases by applying an individual approach to learning and development via coaching and mentoring.

Our model shows a significant impact of the line managers' involvement on the company performance ( $\beta = 0.081$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) supporting our H2b hypothesis. The increased involvement of line managers has positive impact on company performance measured in productivity, innovation, and environmental matters.

The simultaneous confirmation of the H2a and H2b hypothesis gives as support for the H2, hypothesis and indicates the mediation effect of line managers' involvement on the individualization-performance pathway.

We further present the results of the mediation analysis that examines the indirect effect of individual approach in learning and development on company performance through the mediator, line managers' involvement, as shown in Table 6. The analysis was performed using Stata 16 as described by (Sobel, 1987), employing the delta method for estimating the standard errors.

**Table 6 | Mediation analysis**

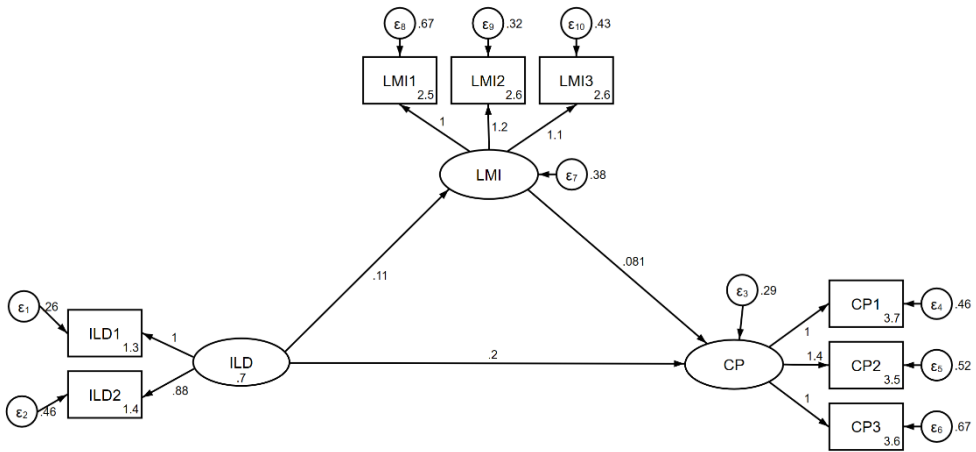
Effect Type	Estimate	Standard error	p-value
<b>Total Effect</b>	0.212	0.019	<0.001
<b>Direct Effect</b>	0.203	0.019	<0.001
<b>Indirect Effect</b>	0.009	0.002	0.001

Source: Authors' own elaboration

We found a total effect of individual approach in learning and development on company performance ( $\beta = 0.212$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a positive and significant impact of individual approach in learning and development on company performance. The direct effect of the individual approach on the company performance was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.203$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as the indirect effect mediated via line managers' involvement. Although significant, compared to the direct effect the indirect effect was rather small ( $\beta = 0.009$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). The substantially larger direct effect compared to indirect effect indicates, that the

major share of the effect happens independently of the line managers' involvement. Our results are illustrated in the path diagram shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 | The path diagram**



Note: Path diagram shows path coefficients, factor loadings, variance and intercept.  
Source: Authors' own elaboration

## Discussion and conclusion

Our data revealed lower utilization of ILD approaches in Central European countries compared to the rest of the sample. Combined with our findings demonstrating a positive relationship between ILD and CP, mediated by LMI, this highlights a significant opportunity for companies in the region to enhance performance by increasing the adoption of ILD and strengthening LMI.

Concerning changes in the environment and new challenges that organizations face, it is also essential to adapt employee learning and development systems and their tools (El-Sharkawy et al., 2023). In the era of the knowledge economy, the ability to create, manage, and use knowledge is a key factor in competitive advantage. The constant need to learn and innovate leads businesses to implement knowledge management systems and build a culture of continuous development. This place demands not only to HRM systems but also to line managers who are directly involved in these processes. Our study intended to examine the extent to which individualization in the approach to employee learning and development using a coaching and mentoring approach affects the performance of medium and large organizations, focusing on the role of line managers.

Our first research question investigated the extent to which a personalized approach to employee learning and development using coaching and mentoring can affect a company's results. The H1 hypothesis about the existence of a positive relationship between ILD and CP was confirmed. By analysing data from 4,145 medium and large companies from the CRANET database, we found that individualisation of the approach to development and education is an effective strategy for supporting the CP in its wide spectrum. The examination of business performance with regard not only to its productivity but also to its innovative and environmental aspects takes into account the systemic perspective (Colakoglu et al., 2006).

The findings show that if an employer approaches the development of its people concerning their current career and personal needs and uses appropriate tools such as coaching and mentoring, it is positively related to the comprehensive performance of the organization. This finding is consistent with the results of several previous studies (Khakwani et al., 2012; Passmore, 2021; Theeboom et al., 2014) which, however, examine the effects of coaching approaches at the individual level of the employee (e.g. performance, skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes and purposeful self-regulation) and subsequently assume its impact on the performance of the entire organization. Our study indicates a direct effect on company-wide performance and thus supports employers in incorporating coaching and mentoring into i-deals, the importance of which has been known and proven for a long time (Rousseau et al., 2009).

Despite the confirmed importance and value of i-deals, several studies have found that surprisingly few employers and employees use them. In the Netherlands, for example, according to Nauta and van de Ven (2015), only a third of Dutch employees use i-deals, most working in small businesses. This trend was also confirmed by a study by Davis and Van Der Heijden (2018), according to which only 22% of employees in the UK reported attempts to conclude an i-deal. Our study supports the conclusion of Van Der Heijden et al. (2021) that there is untapped space for significantly wider and more strategic use of i-deals by both employees and employers in various sectors, both in small and large companies, as such use can improve and help to fully exploit the potential of employer-employee relationships and consequently affect business performance.

Subsequently, we examined how line manager involvement in HR processes influences the effectiveness of individualized employee learning and development through coaching and mentoring. Hypothesis H2, which proposed a positive relationship between ILD and CP mediated by LMI, was confirmed. The results underscore the mediating role of LMI in the relationship between ILD and CP. However, the significantly larger direct effect compared to the indirect effect suggests that a larger proportion of the effect occurs independently of the involvement of line managers. While line managers' involvement has a significant and positive impact on company performance, its mediating effect is relatively small. Therefore, we conclude that other organizational factors, such as leadership styles, organizational culture, or employee demographics, may serve as potential mediators and should be examined in future research. The relevance of these potential mediators in the context of Central Europe is also supported by findings from Gašková (2020), placing the leadership style as a relevant factor of CP, Krupskyi & Kuzmytska (2020) exploring the organizational culture and success of implementing business strategy, or Hutmanová et al. (2025) researching the demographic factors of employees on CP (Gašková, 2020; Hutmanová et al., 2025; Krupskyi & Kuzmytska, 2020).

This finding is partially consistent with previous studies by (Boehme et al., 2023; Townsend & Kellner, 2015), according to which LMI has a decisive impact on the performance of organizations. The findings of our study confirmed that the involvement of line managers in HR processes strengthens the positive effect of individualization in the approach to employee learning and development on the company's results, but their impact is limited. The greater part of the positive effect lies directly in the ILD; the role of line managers has not proven to be decisive here. However, the results show that an individualized approach using coaching

and mentoring elements in learning and development, while involving line managers in HR processes, has the potential to improve business performance.

Furthermore, the impact of ILD on company performance may be shaped by additional mediating factors beyond management support. One of the key factors is a learning-supportive organizational culture that creates an environment for effective transfer of learning into practice. Based on the AMO (Ability – Motivation – Opportunity) model, performance depends not only on the skills acquired through learning (Ability), but also on the motivation to apply them (Motivation) and real opportunities to put them into practice (Opportunity) (Bos-Nehles et al, 2023; Sánchez-Marín et al., 2022). The attributes of ILD itself may also play a role; its strategic linkage to the specific priorities of the organisation, the presence of psychological safety, the provision of monitoring and evaluation, and its impact on KPIs.

The research offers several significant practical implications for companies, particularly for HR practitioners and line managers. The core practical utility lies in providing evidence-based guidance on how to enhance company performance through specific HRM strategies, by adopting individualized approaches to employee education and development. This includes initiatives like coaching and mentoring, which are highlighted as effective tools for respecting and responding immediately to employees' individual needs and situations, thereby supporting continuous personalized learning. The study emphasizes the importance of empowering line managers as important facilitators of HR processes. Organizations should actively involve line managers in ILD processes, recognizing their crucial role in providing support and fostering a learning environment. Using i-deals more strategically, especially their developmental aspects (developmental I-deals), is a tool for implementing individualized HRM and achieving beneficial effects on performance. They can help build stronger employee-employer relationships and increase employee engagement. The study contributes valuable insights for setting HR processes, particularly concerning the needs and expectations of the "new generation" of employees. While the study focused on medium and large companies, the sources suggest the findings regarding using coaching and mentoring as tools to support business performance apply to small businesses as well. Even in companies without dedicated HR departments, where managers are the primary implementers of HR processes, utilizing coaching and mentoring is appropriate.

Our study brings significance to the application practice of companies by recognizing that if a company wants to strengthen performance in the field of productivity, innovation, and environmental activity, it must bring individualized approaches to employee learning and development, while supporting line managers in their role as carriers of HR processes.

The implementation of coaching and coaching approaches as part of development activities is also perceived by several employers as part of socially responsible strategies and practices (Ahmed et al., 2021; González-Masip et al., 2019; Lyons & Bandura 2023; Milner et al., 2018; Turker, 2009; Yasin, 2021). The involvement of line managers can bring positive effects even in these cases. According to Ardito et al. (2020) and Bhatti et al. (2022), the involvement of line managers in HR CSR programs promotes the retention of employees in the company and increases employees' satisfaction and loyalty.

Although the results of the study confirm the positive impact of coaching and mentoring in the framework of learning and development with the participation of line managers on the company's results, the processes of their implementation must be given appropriate attention.

Their optimal setting is necessary, as the impact of coaching on performance is also influenced by its intensity and concentration in time (Agarwal et al., 2009), preferred procedure, employee receptivity, as well as the maturity of the relationship between the line manager and the employee (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liu & Batt, 2010). Managers must be developed and supported themselves as coaches and mentors. Some authors also point out the risks of creating a certain power gap between the line manager and the employee (Ladyshevsky, 2010; Tabarovsky, 2015) and cause confusion or dissatisfaction among employees (Tanskanen et al., 2019). If this force distance is reduced, subordinates perceive the coaching process as more effective (Sue-Chan et al., 2011). Fu et al. (2020) also draw attention to the need to consider the degree and consistency of the implementation of HRM processes by line managers as a condition for their positive connection with individual work performance. The findings show that consistency mitigates the association between individual reactivity of HRM implementation by line managers and individual work performance, so that this association is stronger when consistency is high (Fu et al., 2020)

The research sample of our study consisted only of medium and large companies, due to the presumed systemic approach to HRM. In the environment of companies with more than 250 employees, there is a higher probability of the existence of formalized procedures and standardized procedures for managing people that allow the verification of the relationships studied. However, we consider the findings to apply to small businesses as well.

Coaching is by Peel (2004), important for small businesses because it offers a means to develop crucial human resources to support survival and independence goals, can be tailored to fit their preference for informal, experiential learning, with lower formality, cost, and avoiding bureaucracy (Peel, 2004). Likewise, where there are no HRM departments and managers do not have direct support in personnel processes, but are their bearers and implementers, it is appropriate to use coaching and mentoring as tools to support business performance.

The results of the conducted research can be important for the development of theoretical foundations in the field of HRM, organizational behavior, and adult education. At the same time, our study brings important implications for practice in the field of HR and employee development.

At the theoretical level, this study offers several important contributions by empirically confirming key relationships proposed in the literature. The results confirmed the existence of a positive relationship between an individualized approach to employee development and the overall performance of the organization. They support theoretical assumptions about the importance of an individualized approach to employee learning and development, which includes coaching and mentoring. They confirm that these instruments have a direct and positive impact on the performance of businesses. Our results complement existing studies that have examined impacts at the individual level, providing evidence of the direct impact of individualization on business performance (Khakwani et al., 2012; Passmore, 2021).

Furthermore, the study confirms the potential of i-deals and points to the direct impact of their implementation with the integration of coaching and mentoring on the company's performance (Rousseau et al. 2009). The findings suggest that i-deals can be an important tool for building stronger relationships between employees and organizations and for increasing employee engagement. They enrich theories about motivational factors and the

importance of building work relationships. While the value of i-deals for businesses are established, their use, among employers and employees, is less common in practice than expected and their actual use in practice remains limited (Van Der Heijden et al., 2021; Davis & Van der Heijden, 2018; Nauta & van de Ven, 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014). This highlights the need to further explore the barriers that prevent the wider and more effective application of i-deals in organizations.

The results of the study further confirmed that the LMI in HR processes has a positive effect on the ILD, coaching and mentoring, which is in line with the results of previous research (Boehme et al., 2023; Townsend & Kellner, 2015). Although line managers do not play a primary role, their participation in employee development processes can improve the overall effect of ILD on CPs. The results found contribute to the development of theories about leadership, especially in the context of HR development. New approaches should focus on an individualized employee development strategy that can be effective even without the direct involvement of line managers.

At the same time, the lessons learned have several significant practical implications for prioritizing ILD strategies, involving line managers, and making better use of the potential of i-deals. The results of the research confirmed the positive impact of individualized approaches to employee ILD, especially coaching and mentoring, on the overall performance of organizations. They show the need to focus attention on the implementation and development of individualized approaches to employee learning and development. This includes the possibility of introducing structured coaching and mentoring programs that can respond to the individual needs of each employee (Khakwani et al., 2012; Passmore, 2021; Theeboom et al., 2014).

In this context, line managers should be actively involved in ILD processes. Their important role is not only to provide support to employees, but also to create an environment that fosters lifelong learning and development. HR practitioners should implement coaching programs tailored to employees' career stages, train line managers in effective mentoring practices, and monitor the impact of these initiatives on performance indicators.

The results show that organisations should make greater use of i-deals as a tool for building stronger relationships between employees and employers. These agreements can contribute to increasing employee satisfaction and engagement, which is also supported by the results of the research presented (Rousseau, 2006; Hornung et al., 2010, Anand et al., 2010). The implementation of these approaches must be systematic and goal-conscious, with an emphasis on removing barriers to their acceptance.

Implementing individualized approaches to employee learning and development represents a significant investment in the future of the organization. The lessons learned can serve as a basis for the development of effective strategies that will contribute to increasing the performance, innovation, and sustainability of organizations.

While our research yields interesting findings, it also has its limitations. Despite the extensive research sample, the study focuses only on examining the connections between variables, not on the causality of relationships. Our data are not experimental, but a questionnaire and form from a convenience sample. The data collection was carried out by surveying on the level of HR managers, who we consider qualified to provide relevant data, but these come from a single source and may be partially influenced by a subjective view. This may introduce

self-report bias. Future studies would benefit from incorporating objective performance data. Because our data is cross-sectional, causal inferences should be made with caution. Only medium and large companies were included in the research sample, due to the expected systemic approach to HRM. In a business environment with more than 250 employees, formalized procedures and standardized people management procedures are more likely to exist.

In the future, it is also possible to include in the investigation other factors that could influence relationships, combine other theories, and carry out a comprehensive analysis from different points of view. The measurement model for the company performance variable demonstrated weaker reliability and did not meet the recommended threshold for AVE.

Future studies should examine potential mediators such as leadership styles, organizational culture, or employee demographics to better understand the conditions best supporting individualized learning. A longitudinal design would be preferable for examining causal relationships in future research.

In conclusion, the findings of the study show that an appropriate strategy for increasing the overall performance of an organization is to provide access to coaching and mentoring to employees as part of their career growth, with the support of their line managers and in a way that reflects their work and personal needs. A suitable tool is the long-known but underused i-deals, especially their development part.

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