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Benefiting from customer and competitor knowledge

A market-based approach to organizational learning

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the organizational learning, market orientation and learning orientation concepts, highlight the importance of market knowledge to organizational learning and recommend ways in adopting a market-based approach to organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The extant organizational learning and market orientation literature was reviewed, and the salient points on how adopting a market-based approach to organizational learning promotes competitive advantage are discussed.

Findings – Organizational behavior scholars have devoted a lot of attention to the factors and conditions affecting organizational learning. The end outcome, of course, is to improve organizational performance. Marketing scholars, on the other, focused on the effect of market orientation on organizational performance. Regardless of the different perspectives, both disciplines agree that an organization's long-term survival depends on its ability to generate new knowledge and continuously learn from the external environment.

Practical implications – The paper offers recommendations to practicing managers ways to combine market and learning orientation for organizational learning which can lead to sustained competitive advantage.

Originality/value – The paper provides a fresh perspective on how organizational learning is enhanced by acquiring, disseminating and utilizing market knowledge that is externally focused on customers and competitors.

Keywords Learning organizations, Market orientation

Paper type Research paper

Background

The beginning of the twenty-first century will probably be remembered as the epoch of the knowledge age (Drucker, 1999a). Knowledge has become a key asset and competitive advantage for many organizations operating in increasingly complex and competitive environments (Halawi *et al.*, 2006; von Hayek, 1978; Osterloh and Frey, 2000; Wolfgang, 2006; Yang, 2007). Davenport and Prusak (1998) argued that knowledge is the crucial factor behind sustainable advantage and success for organizations. Very often, the sole survival and success of an organization depends on its ability to harness and use knowledge. Therefore, knowledge, as a key asset, is fundamental to building an organization's competitive advantage (Drucker, 1999b). This contrasts sharply with the bygone industrial age and agricultural age in which the former depended on extensive mechanization of production systems and the latter on mass cultivation of crops and livestock.



The knowledge-based economy has brought about significant shifts in the way organizations respond to rapidly changing customer preferences and constantly shifting competition (Pathirage *et al.*, 2007; Singh *et al.*, 2006). Most organizations now endeavor to lead the market and move ahead of competition by knowing the customers and competitors better and faster. According to Drucker (1995), an organization needs knowledge about what goes on outside for strategic decision-making. It is only from the outside where an organization is able to identify opportunities and threats. However, customer and competitor knowledge in the real markets are characterized as imperfect, subjective and fallible (von Hayek, 1948). Thus, organizations can never be sure whether their knowledge of the market is correct. Consequently, organizations have to constantly search for “better market knowledge”.

The quest for “better market knowledge” has led organizations to constantly strive to learn new trends and ideas from the market (Darroch, 2005; Jafari *et al.*, 2007). Organizations may, however, pursue different knowledge strategies to enhance their market position (Jamali, 2006; Marques and Simon, 2006; von Krogh *et al.*, 2001). Consequently, a new form of organizational learning capability emerges. This organizational learning capability arises when organizations are able to apply market knowledge and modify their behaviors in response to rapidly changing external forces.

The purpose of this paper is to review the organizational learning, market orientation and learning orientation concepts, highlight the importance of market knowledge to organizational learning and emphasize a market-based approach to organizational learning. The paper is structured into various sections that discuss the organizational learning, market orientation, learning orientation and market-based organizational learning concepts. The paper concludes with recommendations in adopting a market-based approach to organizational learning.

Organizational learning

Huber (1991) laid the foundation in defining an organizational learning model and identified four constructs that are linked to the concept. These constructs are knowledge acquisition, knowledge dissemination, interpretation, and organizational memory. He highlighted that knowledge acquisition is the process by which knowledge is obtained, and knowledge dissemination as the process by which knowledge is shared. In addition, he defined interpretation as the process by which a given meaning is construed, and organizational memory as the process by which knowledge is stored for further use. DiBella and Nevis (1998, p. 28) refined Huber’s model by making this sequence of activities i.e. knowledge acquisition and knowledge dissemination explicit and connected them to organizational action or knowledge use. They developed a three-stage organizational learning process: knowledge acquisition, knowledge dissemination and knowledge use. Subsequently, they referred organizational learning as “the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience.” Similarly, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) defined organizational learning as the capability of a company as a whole organization to create and disseminate knowledge. This is the organizational capability to acquire, disseminate and use knowledge from its customers and competitors in order to adapt to a changing external environment.

Besides the more commonly known definitions of organizational learning by DiBella and Nevis (1998), and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), other management and

organizational behavior scholars such as Argote *et al.* (2003), Garvin (1998), Goh (2003) and Swartz (2003) have also provided various definitions. Consequently, various authors have argued that there is not a clear definition of the organizational learning (Johnson, 2002; Ortenblad, 2007; Thomas and Allen, 2006). Nonetheless, there are some key characteristics highlighted that are common to the concept and are widely agreed by most scholars (Argote *et al.*, 2003; DiBella and Nevis, 1998; Garvin, 1998; Goh, 2003; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Swartz, 2003). The key characteristics are, firstly, organizational learning is a capability. Secondly, it is comprised of several knowledge processes. And lastly, the organization will alter the way it operates as a result of the applying knowledge. This organizational learning capability arises from the fact that organizations are able to apply knowledge so as to modify their behavior in response to rapid changes of external factors.

Market orientation

Marketing scholars have developed the market orientation concept that is closely linked to organizational learning processes (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). Market orientation refers to the organization-wide generation of knowledge on current and future customer needs, dissemination of knowledge across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). It deals with the way market knowledge is managed through knowledge acquisition and dissemination activities such as conducting market surveys and discussion of market trends among departments. The organization-wide responsiveness to such knowledge activities includes periodically reviewing products and services to ensure they meet customers' needs. This responsiveness includes co-ordination among functions. Inter-functional coordination is the coordinated utilization of organizational resources in creating superior value for target customers (Narver and Slater, 1990).

While there are some differences on what constitutes the foundation of market orientation by various authors, Lafferty and Hult (2001) suggested that there are four general areas of agreement. These include an emphasis on the customers, the importance of shared knowledge that includes knowledge of competitors, the inter-functional coordination of marketing activities, and being responsive to market activities by taking the appropriate action. In essence, market orientation establishes the principles in which an organization should focus on its customers and competitors, and internal functional activities, which have an effect on organizational performance (Han *et al.*, 1998; Mavondo *et al.*, 2005). Definitions of market orientation by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990) have an operational focus on market knowledge processing activities regarding customers and competitors, particularly knowledge acquisition, knowledge dissemination and the ability to behaviorally respond to what is received.

Beyond operational marketing activities, market orientation also shapes an organization's culture by promoting marketing behaviors towards customers. Narver *et al.* (1998) recognized that a market orientation is not just a set of marketing activities but is also a fundamental part of the organization's culture. Similarly, Slater and Narver (1995) asserted that market orientation is a component of organizational learning culture. Therefore, market orientation affects an organization on two levels. At the operational level, market orientation is concerned with marketing processes. At the strategic level, market orientation helps to shape a culture that focuses on the needs of the customer.

A market-oriented organization continuously seeks better understanding of its current and potential customers (Osugwu, 2006; Sen, 2006). This goal requires deep appreciation of current and changing needs and wants of the customers, and focus on knowledge acquisition and dissemination activities or processes (Uncles, 2000). Consequently, one key aspect of market orientation is customer orientation (Narver and Slater, 1990). Thus, having a customer orientation builds sufficient understanding of the organization's target customers so that it is able to continuously create superior value for them. Cunningham and Gerrard (2002) found that being customer-oriented is one of five key characteristics of successful Singaporean organizations and helps to better business performance. The study by Slater and Narver (2000) suggests that different knowledge capabilities contribute to customer value creation in different ways such as improved product quality and better customer satisfaction.

A complete reliance on customer orientation often leads to incompleteness in business strategy (Day and Wensley, 1983). This is because the organization may be forced to adopt a reactive stance when dealing with competitors' maneuvers. Being competitor-oriented means that the organization understands short-term strengths and weaknesses, and long-term capabilities and strategies of both key current and potential competitors (Narver and Slater, 1990). Dawes (2000) found that among customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination, competitor orientation emerged as the variable with the strongest association with performance among high-profit Australian organizations. He explained that this occurs because these organizations distinguish themselves from others by being very informed of competitors' moves in the market. Similarly, findings from Noble *et al.* (2002) also suggest that organizations possessing higher levels of competitor orientation tend to exhibit superior performance. On the other hand, being too competitor-focused is also not desirable because the attention on the competition can lead to the neglect of customer needs (Deshpande *et al.*, 1993).

Day and Wensley (1983) proposed that a balanced mix of customer and competitor orientation is an important requisite for maintaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Deng and Tsacle (2003) suggested that organizations are market systems in which goods and services are exchanged across boundaries between players. In such systems, the players will act as "buyers and sellers" of outputs that value for other organizational members. These outputs may include customer and competitor knowledge. Market knowledge, a key organizational asset, is derived from a combination of customer and competitor knowledge (Maltz and Kohli, 1996; Srivastava *et al.*, 2001). It is imperative that organizations focus on acquiring knowledge about customers' needs as well as competitors' capabilities, and utilizing this market knowledge to create superior customer value (Day, 1994; Farrell and Oczkowski, 2003; Sinkula, 2002; Slater and Narver, 1995).

Learning orientation

In clarifying the concepts of market orientation and learning orientation, Baker and Sinkula (1999) highlighted that the former is a characteristic of the organization that directs market information processing while the latter is a characteristic that affects an organization's inclination towards generative learning. Sinkula *et al.* (1997) had earlier suggested that market orientation is essentially a set of knowledge producing behaviors while learning orientation is a set of knowledge questioning norms.

Slater and Narver (1995) suggested that, in order for higher-order learning to occur, market orientation must be accompanied by the appropriate organizational learning processes. They mentioned that while a strong market orientation may lead to single loop or adaptive learning about customers and competitors, it will not routinely lead to double loop or generative learning unless it is accompanied by a strong learning orientation. It is the combination of a strong market orientation and a strong learning orientation that is likely to lead to sustained competitive advantage because generative learning is typically a prerequisite to more fundamental strategic shifts in the business environment (Baker and Sinkula, 2002; Sondergaard, 2005). Therefore, market orientation only enhances performance when it is combined with a learning orientation as this ability gives the market-driven organization an advantage in terms of the speed and effectiveness of its response to opportunities and threats. Lee and Tsai (2005) concluded that emphasis of market orientation and learning orientation promotes business performance while Farrell (2000) found that learning orientation has a stronger positive effect on business performance than market orientation. These performance indicators include customer retention, new product success, sales growth, return on investment and overall performance.

Slater and Narver (1995) also suggested that market orientation and learning orientation are inseparable and interdependent for organizational performance. McGuinness and Morgan (2005) found that market orientation and learning orientation jointly influence the success of dynamic strategy outcomes. Farrell (2000) proposed that market orientation is positively related to learning orientation, and market orientation is the principal cultural foundation of the learning organization. He suggested that a market orientation is the underlying set of organizational values, and that learning orientation is the manifestation of this culture.

Market-based organizational learning

Given the importance of organizational learning to an organization's survival and success, it is not surprising that management and organizational scholars have emphasized the need to develop a superior organizational learning capability (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Stewart, 2002). Marketing scholars have also studied the effect of market orientation on organizational learning (Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Farrell, 2000; Hurley and Hult, 1998; Sinkula *et al.*, 1997; Slater and Narver, 1995). Both groups of scholars agree that an organization's long-term survival depends on its ability to generate new market knowledge and continuously learn from the environment. This organizational learning capability will be a key source of competitive advantage to improve organizational performance.

Sinkula's (1994) introduction of the learning orientation construct to the marketing literature laid the foundation for market-based organizational learning. Prior to Sinkula's study, there was relatively little scholarly research on organizational learning in a marketing context. Market-based organizational learning happens when an organization absorbs market knowledge from the external environment from its customers and competitors. Essentially, the linking of market orientation and organizational learning has led to the idea of market-based organizational learning (Sinkula *et al.*, 1997). Combining both market and learning orientations give rise to the concept of market-based organizational learning. This form of learning by an

organization from its customers and competitors is generally referred to as market-based organizational learning.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between a market-based and a marketing-based view of organizational learning. The former view emphasizes the over-arching business philosophy or corporate culture that is manifested in activities that create superior value for customers (Narver and Slater, 1990). This is actually a top-down and external view that concerns the degree to which top management pays special attention to customers' ever-changing needs and competitors' strategies (Paul, 2005). The market-based view is closely associated with market orientation resulting in superior business performance (Baker and Sinkula, 2002; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). On the other hand, the marketing-based view emphasizes the execution of specific marketing activities within the marketing function (Akimova, 2000; Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1997; Hooley and Beracs, 1997). The main focus is managerial rather than cultural. The starting point is internal to an organization where the above-average performance is seen as a consequence of organization-specific implementation of marketing strategies (Chang, 1996). In this sense, the marketing-based view is more interested in actual marketing practice. While acknowledging the importance of marketing practices, the main focus of this paper is on the key players of the market i.e. customers and competitors as the main source of external knowledge that have a positive influence on business performance by being market-oriented.

Recommendations

Having established that market thinking should be combined with organizational learning, there are various ways which the practicing manager can improve business performance by adopting a market-based approach to organizational learning. In general, it is to integrate market knowledge with learning through organization design and linking market acquisition and dissemination activities to learning instead of separating tasks and breaking up the workflows (Curado, 2006). In this way, market orientation and learning orientation can be combined to optimize business performance.

Market-based organizational learning can be accomplished by integrating day-to-day marketing and learning activities. von Mises (1949) suggested that external policies influence the incentives of organizations to search for new and "better market knowledge" of more successful competitors. In a similar vein, internal policies and procedures also have a significant effect on the way employees acquire and disseminate market knowledge. For example, in identifying if there is a lack of market perspective, the senior manager could review if the various business units meet regularly, perhaps at least twice a year, to find out what products or services customers will need in the future. In addition, the manager should frequently review the likely effects of changes in the business environment, for example, government regulation and its impact on customers. Such directed activities facilitate learning by looking around outside the immediate working environment and acquiring new perspectives (Garvin, 1998). Beyond just focusing on the customers, the organization's competitors should also look in a directed manner to ensure complete market perspective. Competitive activities which could be formally instituted include "picking the brains" of the competitors at trade shows to better understand how they position their products, and analyzing competitors' recruitment ads and public solicitations for bids

to determine their strategy and type of projects that competitors are contemplating. It is vital that the managers create favorable learning conditions and set goals for daily directed market knowledge acquisition activities and goals. Research have shown that is a positive relationship between both goal orientations i.e. establishing learning goals and performance (Paparoidamis, 2005).

Once a perspective of the customers and competitors has been formed through daily market knowledge acquisition activities, such knowledge can then be disseminated within the organization. This is where the managers can design organizational structures and processes to support learning (Kenney and Gudergan, 2006). Such structures and process could include quarterly interdepartmental meetings to discuss market trends and customers' future needs. Creating formal channels where timely competitor information from one department can be quickly disseminated to other relevant parties (Herschel and Jones, 2005). Subsequently, the IT system can also be designed to facilitate the extraction, capture, distribution and personalization of market knowledge to promote learning (Mohamed *et al.*, 2006). These activities and systems allow market knowledge to be leveraged rapidly and efficiently throughout the organization (Garvin, 1998).

Conclusion

The next major source of competitive advantage would likely come from more outward orientation towards customers and competitors to compete on the delivery of superior customer value. The paper offers a fresh perspective on how organizational learning can be enhanced by acquiring, disseminating and utilizing market knowledge which is more externally focused on customers and competitors. It also offers recommendations for the practicing manager on ways to adopt a market-based approach to organizational learning.

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