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Training and performance: The mediating role of organizational learning



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Abstract Although there is a general recognition in the literature that training improves a firm's performance, empirical research does not always provide evidence to support this effect. One possible explanation is that training does not have a direct effect on performance but an indirect effect by improving other organizational outcomes. This paper suggests that organizational learning is one of those variables and that it mediates the relationship between training and performance and that the adoption of a learning-oriented training enhances performances through its positive effect on organizational learning. Using a sample of Spanish firms we obtain empirical evidence, which supports the view that this mediating effect is present.

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1. Introduction

The study of the relation between training and firm's performance has occupied a good amount of research during the last decades. In general, literature considers that training improves organizational performance by creating a workforce with extensive knowledge and skills (Kraiger, 2003; Tharenou et al., 2007; Ballesteros et al., 2012). The idea

underlying this assumption is that training plays a key role in enhancing two of the main sources of competitive advantage for the firm: its human capital and its organizational knowledge (Aragon et al., 2003; Subramaniam and Youndt, 2005; Lopez-Cabrales et al., 2006).

Despite the presumed positive effect of training on all levels of organizational outcomes: individual and team, organizational and social (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009), the empirical research focusing on the training-performance link does not always provide evidence to support such a relationship.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain why some studies do not find any empirical support for the positive relationship between training and performance.

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The literature usually highlights a likely lag effect in the relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices, training being one of them, and performance (Guest, 2001; Wright et al., 2001; Collins and Clark, 2003; Wall and Wood, 2005). For instance, Guest (2001) considers the implementation of any HRM practice requires of the appropriate time lag before it and that "it may be quite a long time".

Other explanation is that training may not have a direct effect on performance, but an indirect effect by improving employees' performance and other organizational outcomes. However, only a few papers have studied empirically whether the relationship between training and performance is mediated by other variables. One of them is the research of Ahmad and Schroeder (2003). They find that training in job related skills and cross-training have an indirect effect on operations performance through its effect on organizational commitment. Gelade and Ivery (2003) provide evidence that work climate mediates the relationship between training and the unit performance. And, Faems et al. (2005) find that the link between training and performance is mediated by productivity.

This paper focuses on the mediating role of organizational learning between training and performance. There are several reasons for this focus. First, the literature highlights the vital role of organizational learning in a firm's success (Nevis et al., 1995; Brockmand and Morgan, 2003). Second, some studies suggest that training is a key tool for improving organizational learning (Garvin, 1993; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Jerez Gomez et al., 2004). Finally, to date, the linkages between training, organizational learning and performance have hardly been examined together in the literature, particularly from an empirical perspective.

The paper begins with a review of the relevant literature about the relationships between training, organizational learning and performance. Then it proposes a model which links these three variables. Then, the model is tested using a sample of 832 Spanish companies. Finally, the findings are presented along with the managerial implications of the study, its limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Organizational learning and performance

In general, organizational learning (OL) is conceived as "a principal means of achieving the strategic renewal of an enterprise" (Crossan et al., 1999). There is also a general agreement that OL is a multidimensional concept (i.e., Senge, 1990; Slater and Narver, 1994, 1995; Jerez Gomez et al., 2004; Chiva et al., 2007; Tohidi et al., 2012). In this line, Slater and Narver (1994) asserted that "organizational learning is a complex, multidimensional construct occurring at different cognitive levels ... and encompassing multiple sub processes". However, since different perspectives have been adopted to study OL, dimensions identified within this concept differ (Chiva et al., 2007). In general, two main approaches have been adopted in the field of OL (Tsang, 1997). One of them defines OL as a process by which the organizations learn and develops new knowledge (Huber,

1991; Slater and Narver, 1995; Jiménez and Sanz, 2006; Jyothibabu et al., 2010; Flores et al., 2012). This process, following Huber (1991), is integrated by another four sub-processes: knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation and memory. Each of these sub-processes is therefore taken as a dimension of the OL concept (Chiva et al., 2007).

The second approach defines OL as the organizational orientation to learn or as an organizational capability that facilitates the OL process (Garvin, 1993; Jerez Gomez et al., 2004; Chiva et al., 2007; Camps and Luna-Aroca, 2012). In this line, Garvin (1993) suggests that a "learning organization is an organization skilled in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights". Thus, the organizational learning capability can be defined as the organizational and managerial characteristics that facilitate the organizational learning process or allow an organization to learn (Chiva et al., 2007; Tohidi et al., 2012). From this perspective, the dimensions of the OL concept are its main facilitators (Chiva et al., 2007).

This paper adopts this second approach and considers OL as an organizational capability which facilitate the organizational learning process, that is to say the "process of change in individual and shared thought and action, which is affected by and embedded in the institutions of the organization" (Crossan et al., 1999).

No matter the approach adopted, there is a growing consensus in the field that OL conceptualizations need to consider multiple levels of analysis within the enterprise: individual, group and organization (Slater and Narver, 1994; Ahmed et al., 1999; Crossan et al., 1999; Bontis et al., 2002; Bapuji and Crossan, 2004; Bell et al., 2010; Jyothibabu et al., 2010).

Individual level learning refers to the process by which individuals generate new insights and knowledge from existing tacit or explicit information and knowledge. From a capability approach, individual learning capability refers to the individuals' competencies and motivation to learn (Bontis et al., 2002) and it is reflected in some individual behaviors such as experimentation, generation of new insights, be aware of critical issues that affect ones work, have a sense of pride and ownership in one's work, etc. (Bontis et al., 2002).

Group level learning involves individuals transferring their individual knowledge within a group so that all members develop a shared understanding (Huber, 1991; Crossan et al., 1999; Kiessling et al., 2009). Dialog and joint action, which are elements that describe the effective work of groups, are crucial in knowledge transfer within a group (Senge, 1990; Crossan et al., 1999; Bontis et al., 2002).

Finally, organizational level learning occurs when individual and group knowledge is institutionalized (Crossan et al., 1999). In other words, it involves "embedding individual and group learning into the non-human aspects of the organization including systems, structures, strategy, culture and procedures" (Bontis et al., 2002).

Although the three levels of learning – individual, group and organizational – are distinct, they are interrelated. Individual learning is considered to be a prerequisite for organizational learning (Kim, 1993; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Popadiuk and Choo, 2006) because "organizations

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