



# Overcoming knowledge loss through the utilization of an unlearning context<sup>☆</sup>



Anthony K.P. Wensley<sup>a,\*</sup>, Juan Gabriel Cegarra Navarro<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Management Department and ICCIT, The University of Toronto at Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Business Management Department, Technical University of Cartagena, Cartagena, Spain

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received February 2014

Received in revised form December 2014

Accepted January 2015

Available online 24 February 2015

### Keywords:

Unlearning

Exploration

Exploitation

Marketing knowledge

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* This study explores the following question: How can managers overcome knowledge loss or degradation and/or replace obsolete knowledge to stimulate the realized absorptive capacity in the Spanish hospitality sector in particular and organizations in general?

*Design/methodology/implications:* This study uses a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach to test empirically the research model and the relationships in hypothesis and validates them through factor analysis of data coming from 164 hotels in the Spanish hospitality sector.

*Findings:* The key managerial implication of this paper is that knowledge creation, assimilation, and structure for organizations' success in the long term require administrators and organizations to develop and implement the so-called unlearning context.

*Originality/value:* In an applied sense, the model facilitates organizations to counteract negative effects of accidental degradation or complete loss of knowledge in relevant areas and to facilitate the replacement of obsolete knowledge.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Since the last decade, the interest is growing on the concepts of unlearning and forgetting in both an individual and, more particularly, organizational contexts. While forgetting involves the apparent loss of knowledge that individuals store in long-term memory, unlearning can refer either to the intentional knowledge erasure or to the unintentional knowledge loss. Moreover, the term intentional unlearning refers to the development of new adaptive capacities at the organizational level that facilitate relearning (Hedberg, 1981; Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984; Starbuck, 1996). Some critics discuss the reductionism of earlier work addressing unintentional (accidental) unlearning. This reductionism impedes exploring the relationship of unintentional unlearning with intentional unlearning. Such an approach impedes the investigation of the competence resulting from unlearning. This competence underpins subsequent strategic realignment (Tsang & Zabra, 2008).

In the past, intentional or unintentional unlearning processes do not have an adequate distinction (Fernandez & Sune, 2009). Unintentional

or accidental unlearning refers to knowledge loss deriving from losing or accidentally deleting computerized data, not preserving adequate documentation to interpret reports, sensor reading failure, among others. Conversely, intentional unlearning is an intentional process that explicitly addresses the need to adapt to discrepancies between current reality knowledge and the existing body of organizational knowledge (Fernandez & Sune, 2009). To address these issues, an unlearning context is necessary for organizations to recover from accidental unlearning and identify situations where they need to unlearn and re-learn. This unlearning context facilitates the investigation of the existing knowledge state in an organization and/or the revision or re-creation of this knowledge.

The focus of this study is the accidental loss of marketing knowledge. Kohlbacher (2008) defines marketing knowledge as “all knowledge, both declarative as well as procedural concerning marketing thinking and behavior in a corporation”. Hence, marketing knowledge involves understanding customers, their needs, wants, and aims and becomes essential for businesses to align their processes, products, and services to build vital and valuable customer relationships (Kohlbacher, 2008). Gibbert, Leibold, and Probst (2002) show that knowledge management allows customers' corporations to be more sensitive to emerging market opportunities than competitors. Moreover, knowledge management fosters that employees constructively challenge the established wisdom relating to “how things are done around here”, and rapidly create economic value for the corporation, its shareholders, and equally important, its customers.

<sup>☆</sup> The authors are grateful to contributions from Gabriel Cepeda-Carrión and Glenn Dent for their effort in revising this study. The authors also thank Víctor Reyes Mínguez for his copy-editing support. The authors alone are responsible for all limitations and errors that may arise from this study.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [anthony.wensley@utoronto.ca](mailto:anthony.wensley@utoronto.ca) (A.K.P. Wensley), [juan.cegarra@upct.es](mailto:juan.cegarra@upct.es) (J.G.C. Navarro).

This study explores realized absorptive capacity (RACAP). RACAP is a firm's capability to transform and exploit the routines that facilitate combining existing, new, and assimilated knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002). A marketing knowledge loss will leave RACAP maintenance to manager's ability and willingness to replace lost knowledge with modified or updated knowledge and knowledge structures. Updated or modified knowledge results from scanning the wider business environment and identifying, defining, meeting, and bringing forward customer needs (Gibb, 1997). The revision of existing organizational marketing knowledge is also important to 'weed out' obsolete knowledge. Thus, an internal context fostering existing knowledge review, lost knowledge modification or replacement, and the integration of new knowledge and knowledge structures with existing knowledge seem essential as organizations strive to maintain or enhance their RACAP.

This study suggests that engaging in intentional unlearning may reduce marketing knowledge loss or depreciation/degradation. In this context, intentional unlearning involves identifying inaccurate or incomplete knowledge to replace this knowledge with new or modified knowledge. This process potentially helps those managers seeking to maintain or enhance RACAP when responding to an unexpected marketing knowledge loss or replacing obsolete knowledge. Unlearning context contributes by preparing the ground for updating knowledge and knowledge structures. The next section presents the theoretical background and the hypotheses arising from literature review.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Absorptive capacity is firm's "ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Kim (1998) considers that absorptive capacity involves the ability to learn and the problem-solving skills enabling firms to assimilate knowledge and create new knowledge. Absorptive capacity also comprises certain dynamic capabilities and the capacity to engage in organizational learning (Jung-Erceg, Pandza, Armbruster, & Dreher, 2007). Recognizing absorptive capacity dynamic aspects highlights the importance of continually reconfiguring firms' knowledge-based assets and hence emphasizes knowledge processes rather than knowledge stocks (Jantunen, 2005).

Absorptive capacity depends on external connectivity and internal social networks. Organizations use their internal experience, expertise, and processes to interpret external knowledge meaning, exploiting this knowledge to generate innovations. Thus, organizations' development of a robust absorptive capacity is a function of organization's existing resources, existing tacit and explicit knowledge, internal routines, management competences, culture, and internal and external connectiveness (Gray, 2006). Absorptive capacity development resulting from a long process of knowledge accumulation occurs simultaneously with the development of the organizational capabilities that recognize and appreciate new knowledge, increasing innovative capabilities.

Zahra and George (2002) gain insight into the processes within absorptive capacity development by explaining two separate components of absorptive capacity. Potential absorptive capacity (PACAP) is the capacity to acquire and assimilate new knowledge from external sources, while realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) is organization's capability to effectively transform and exploit existing knowledge. RACAP facilitates the leveraging of knowledge absorption and transformation into value-adding innovations (Fosfuri & Tribó, 2008). Zahra and George (2002, p. 190) observe that, "transformation denotes a firm's capability to develop and refine the routines that facilitate combining existing knowledge and the newly acquired and assimilated knowledge". Moreover, transformation involves interpreting existing knowledge, adding new knowledge, and deleting items of old and potentially obsolete knowledge.

Transformation precedes exploitation. Exploitation refers to "a firm's ability to harvest and incorporate knowledge into its operations" (Zahra & George, 2002, p. 190). Knowledge exploitation often results in new goods and processes (Fosfuri & Tribó, 2008). This study posits that transformation and exploitation occur simultaneously and they constitute the RACAP, according to Zahra and George (2002). Organizational unlearning literature indicates that intentional unlearning derives from old knowledge destabilization, usually because of employees' turnover or organizational memory decay (De Holan, Philips, & Lawrence, 2004; Fernandez & Sune, 2009; Lee & Sukoco, 2011). A successful destabilization may start unlearning processes (Norcross, Krebsl, & Prochaska, 2011). Summarizing, accidental unlearning at the individual or organizational level resulting from destabilizing events (e.g., situations which lead to computer files loss of computer files because of mistakes or technical breakdowns, failure to preserve adequately documentation to interpret reports or sensor readings) lead to the creation of a new knowledge space (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). Furthermore, knowledge accidental loss or depreciation/degradation leads to dissonance among the remaining knowledge and knowledge structures and the need to restore individual or organizational knowledge coherence through adaptation, conversion, or revision of knowledge to re-establish the compatibility of extant and new knowledge (Ohlsson, 2011; Tsang & Zabra, 2008).

This discussion supports that valuable knowledge unintentional loss affects both intentional unlearning and RACAP value.

However, transformation and exploitation levels in an organization indicate the intensity of efforts toward firms' internal capabilities' development and its capacity for accessing and utilizing marketing knowledge from marketing personnel (Darroch & McNaughton, 2002). Marketing knowledge unintentional loss may seem to have a negative relationship with RACAP since such knowledge loss may result in: 1) Narrowing individuals' cognitive process; 2) hindering their ability to plan, reason, and understand the situation effectively; 3) fostering an inadequacy sense regarding the combination of unexpected links between variables (people and processes); and 4) limiting individuals' prior knowledge on potential interactions between new processes and their consequences (Cegarra, Wensley, & Eldridge, 2014).

However, an unlearning context strongly reduces knowledge loss or depreciation/degradation. Therefore, intentional unlearning at the organizational level involves the replacement of lost knowledge with new marketing knowledge and knowledge structures. As Darr, Argote, and Epple (1995) indicate, organizations fostering values of corporate governance such as fairness, transparency, open communication, and trust, can reduce knowledge depreciation/degradation effects.

This study draws on prior research indicating that an unlearning context enables an environment that supports lost knowledge replacement (Bettis & Prahalad, 1995; Day & Nedungadi, 1994). This context allows organization members to reduce the negative effects of losing well-established marketing knowledge and introduce new approaches (e.g., procedures, structural or cultural artifacts) enhancing RACAP (Cegarra et al., 2014; Leal-Rodríguez, Ariza-Montes, Roldán, & Leal-Millán, 2014).

According to this discussion, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

**H1.** Accidental unlearning as a hindrance stressor has a relationship with RACAP reduction and intentional unlearning context mediates this relationship.

**H2.** The existence of an unlearning context has a positive relationship with absorptive capacity level.

Fig. 1 presents the model underlying the analysis in this paper. The lower branch in the figure proposes that accidental unlearning is a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1017199>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1017199>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)