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Conceptual paper

The effect of organizational structure on absorptive capacity in single and dual learning modes[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Structural theories of absorptive capacity (ACAP) usually aim to specify organizational design characteristics that lead to a high level of ACAP. Using the theories of organizational design and knowledge management, the main objective of this study is to review how organizational structure relates to ACAP in single and dual learning modes.

Method: This study analyzes the structure of the ACAP relationship in management and organization studies based on a literature review of ACAP-related papers.

Results: Drawing on a review of the evolution of ACAP, this study contributes to the ACAP literature as follows: (1) it investigates the role of ACAP as an independent variable; (2) it focuses on the behavioral domain of ACAP; (3) it relates structural variables to ACAP in single and dual learning modes; (4) it establishes a link between the structural variables and ACAP using a two-stage model, comprising initiation and implementation stages; and (5) it predicts ACAP by identifying several testable propositions and deriving two predictive contingency models.

Conclusions: This study recommends a series of propositions and two predictive contingency models as directions for future research and theory construction.

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El efecto de la estructura sobre la capacidad de absorción de las organizaciones: Efectos sobre los modos de aprendizaje único y dual

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Objetivo: Tradicionalmente, las teorías de la capacidad de absorción (ACAP) han analizado cuales son las características de diseño organizacional que conducen a un alto nivel de ACAP. Utilizando la teoría del diseño organizacional y la teoría de la gestión del conocimiento, el objetivo principal de este trabajo es revisar cómo la estructura organizacional se relaciona con la capacidad de absorción (ACAP), atendiendo tanto al aprendizaje único, como al aprendizaje dual.

Método: Este trabajo realiza una revisión bibliográfica sobre la relación estructura – ACAP en el entorno organizativo.

Resultados: A partir de una revisión de la evolución del ACAP, este trabajo ofrece importantes contribuciones a la literatura del ACAP como: (1) investigar el rol de ACAP como una variable independiente; (2) centrarse en el enfoque conductual del ACAP; (3) establecer un vínculo entre las variables estructurales y el ACAP, (4) presentando un modelo para un modelo de aprendizaje simple, y otro de aprendizaje dual. (5) presentar un concepto de predicción de ACAP identificando varias proposiciones comprobables y derivando dos modelos predictivos de contingencia.

Conclusiones: Este trabajo finaliza recomendando una serie de proposiciones y dos modelos predictivos de contingencia como direcciones para la investigación futura y la construcción teórica.

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Introduction

During the past two decades, researchers have proposed a number of models and frameworks with which to analyze absorptive capacity (ACAP). The interest in ACAP has grown significantly over the past three decades, and continues to do so today (Apriliyanti & Alon, 2017; Gao, Yeoh, Wong, & Scheepers, 2017). Unfortunately, few studies capture the richness and multidimensional nature of ACAP (Jansen, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2005a), although several recent works have examined the multidimensionality of ACAP (Apriliyanti & Alon, 2017; Gao et al., 2017; Martinkenaite & Breunig, 2016).

A recent review of the literature on ACAP by Gao et al. (2017) shows that ACAP is typically represented in the literature as either a dependent or an independent variable or as a mediator. Very few studies consider ACAP as an independent variable, or as mediating or moderating variables. Thus, researchers have largely ignored the organizational antecedents of ACAP, focusing instead on the outcomes of ACAP. Gao et al. (2017) find that researchers are more interested in investigating the influence of ACAP on organizational phenomena than in examining the effect of organizational phenomena on organizational ACAP. Conventionally, ACAP is perceived as the outcome of an investment in research and development, although recently, debates over its proactive dimension have begun to emerge (De Araújo Burcharth, Lettl, & Ulhøi, 2015; Gao et al., 2017).

It is important that we investigate ACAP as being dependent, independent, a mediator, or a moderator, because, as argued by Cepeda-Carrion, Leal-Millán, Martelo-Landroguez, and Leal-Rodriguez (2016), the multidimensionality of ACAP

is essentially a distinct concept and, consequently, may draw on different structures, objectives, and strategies. On the other hand, Jansen et al. (2005a) argue that organizational antecedents may have differing effects on the dimensions of ACAP and, thus, may lead to different performance outcomes.

Until the work of Cohen and Levinthal (1990), research had focused on technical aspect of organizations, or intellectual property (e.g., copyrights, patents, trade secrets, proprietary rights, and R&D expenditure), as the key determinants of ACAP. Then, Zahra and George (2002) began a new debate, focusing on the non-technical aspect of organizations, such as organizational capabilities and managerial practices, as the key drivers of ACAP (Ali & Park, 2016). Recently, Gao et al. (2017) categorized the domain of ACAP literature into technical and behavior aspects, and concluded that 44 of 65 studies focus on the technical domain.

Zahra and George (2002) classify ACAP along four dimensions, which they combine into two subsets: knowledge acquisition and assimilation (potential ACAP, or PACAP), and knowledge transformation and exploitation (realized ACAP, or RACAP). The diverse, richness and multidimensionality of ACAP suggest that, within an organization, it is a dynamic, complex, multi-phased activity that moves, from PACAP to RACAP. Different organizational designs, configurations, and attitudes of strategic decision-makers result in variations in the development of ACAP. The successful completion of each stage seems to call for a different organizational structure.

This study relates knowledge to innovation, because the organizational characteristics that promote adaptive innovation also promote learning (Ali & Park, 2016). This rationale is supported by Lundvall (2006), who advises that there is no clear distinction between innovation and knowledge,

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