



Learning culture and knowledge management processes: To what extent are they effectively related?



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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Manuscript received: 30/11/2013
Revision received: 15/09/2014
Accepted: 30/10/2014

Keywords:

Learning culture
Knowledge management
Organizational level of analysis

Palabras clave:

Cultura de aprendizaje
Gestión del conocimiento
Nivel de análisis organizacional

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary context of high competitiveness between organizations, organizational learning culture and knowledge management (KM) have been considered key concepts in both academic and managerial settings. This study aims to provide empirical support for the relationship between organizational learning culture and knowledge management, specifically concerning the prediction of learning culture on KM processes. Data collection was carried out through questionnaires in 50 Portuguese manufacturing firms. Data was analyzed at the organizational level using standard multiple regressions. The results showed a significant and positive relationship between learning culture and KM practices. Concerning the two dimensions of learning culture, internal integration was the main predictor for KM formal practices, KM informal practices and strategic management of knowledge, whereas the external adaptation dimension was shown to predict only the strategic management of knowledge. The present study contributes to theoretical and empirical findings concerning the relationship between learning culture and knowledge management processes.

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La cultura de aprendizaje y los procesos de gestión del conocimiento: ¿hasta qué punto se relacionan de hecho?

RESUMEN

En el contexto actual de alta competencia entre organizaciones, la cultura de aprendizaje organizacional y la gestión del conocimiento (GC) se consideran clave tanto en entornos académicos como directivos. Este estudio pretende proporcionar apoyo empírico para la relación entre la cultura de aprendizaje organizacional y la gestión del conocimiento, y más concretamente sobre el grado en que la cultura de aprendizaje es capaz de predecir los procesos de GC. La recogida de datos se realizó mediante cuestionarios en 50 empresas portuguesas de producción. Los datos fueron analizados al nivel organizacional usando regresiones múltiples. Los resultados mostraron una relación positiva y significativa entre la cultura de aprendizaje y las prácticas de GC. Con respecto a las dos dimensiones de la cultura de aprendizaje, la integración interna fue el principal predictor de las prácticas formales de GC, de las prácticas informales de GC y de la gestión estratégica del conocimiento, mientras que la adaptación externa fue capaz de predecir sólo la gestión estratégica del conocimiento. El presente estudio contribuye a hallazgos teóricos y empíricos relativos a la relación entre la cultura de aprendizaje y los procesos de gestión del conocimiento.

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The idea of knowledge as a resource used by organizations to gain competitiveness also arose in the 1990s, when the importance of managing this resource, that is, the concept of knowledge management (KM), started to gain attention in managerial and academic contexts (Cardoso, 2008). Organizations' knowledge management capability has been pointed out as the main source of innovation within organizations (Gracia, Martínez-Tur, & Peiró, 2001).

Numerous empirical and theoretical studies about knowledge management have been carried out since the 1990s, and important advances have been made, but two research gaps can still be identified. First, although learning is considered a key process in efficient knowledge management, there is a lack of studies that integrate knowledge management and learning. We agree with Lytras and Poulodi (2006), who, after analyzing several KM frameworks, concluded that "the learning dimension has been under-represented and underestimated" and that "the inevitable relation of knowledge and learning seems to be taken for granted in most of the approaches" (p. 65). Second, despite the importance in the literature of organizational culture to knowledge management processes, research examining this relationship has been scarce (Chiva & Alegre, 2005; Lytras & Poulodi, 2006; Oliver & Kandadi, 2006; Wong & Aspinwall, 2005). In this paper, we will contribute to shedding some light on both of these research gaps, analyzing the relationship between organizational culture, or more specifically, learning culture, and knowledge management.

Organizational Learning, Organizational Culture and Learning Culture

Organizational learning takes place when learning is transferred from the individual to the collective level in a dynamic process of interaction among different existing levels within the organization (individual, group, and organization). When conceptualizing organizational learning, authors mainly define it as either a technical or a social process. The former considers that organizational learning is mostly related to effectiveness in processing and interpreting information, both inside and outside the organization. On the other hand, the social view of organizational learning focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences at work. Organizational learning is then considered as a social process once it emerges from social interactions, normally in the work environment (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999).

In the organizational learning and learning organization literature (especially in the latter), organizational culture is mainly seen as a facilitating factor for learning in (and from) organizations (e.g., Ahmed, Loh, & Zairi, 1999; Baetz, 2003; Campbell & Cairns, 1994; Conner & Clawson, 2004; Hill, 1996; Maccoby, 2003; Marquardt, 1996; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). In the literature, this orientation of a culture towards learning is called a learning-oriented culture or simply a learning culture. In short, it is the type of culture that a learning organization should have because, as Wang, Yang, and McLean (2007) state, "in practice, an organizational learning culture can be a vital aspect of organizational culture and the core of a learning organization" (p.156).

According to Schein (1992), organizational culture or group culture can be defined as: "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 12).

A learning culture can be defined as a culture oriented towards the promotion and facilitation of learning by its employees. It encourages the sharing and spreading of what is learned, aiming at the development and success of the organization (Rebelo, 2006).

Concerning the characteristics that distinguish a learning culture from other types of cultures, convergence points among different authors (Ahmed et al., 1999; Hill, 1996; López, Peón & Ordás, 2004; Marquardt, 1996; Marsick & Watkins, 2003; Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1997; Schein, 1992, 1994) can be detected. Among these points, we highlight learning as one of the organization's core values, a focus on people, concern about all stakeholders, existence of tolerance of a diversity of people and opinions to strengthen innovation, stimulation of experimentation, encouragement of an attitude of responsible risk, tolerance of error and readiness to recognise errors and learn from them, leadership's commitment and support, as well as open and intense communication.

Internal Integration and External Adaptation

Two dimensions of organizational culture. As mentioned above, the resolution of problems concerning external adaptation and internal integration is related to the concept of culture (Schein, 1992).

Internal integration consists of the structuring and coordination of internal processes in the organization (e.g., leadership style, the way work is arranged, the communication structure), whereas external adaptation is related to the orientation of the organization towards the environment (e.g., clients, competitors and other stakeholders), in order to successfully correspond to the existing demands.

According to Schein (1985), these two dimensions are considered basic functions of organizational culture: dealing with problems of internal integration and external adaptation. Both groups and organizations have to constantly manage these two aspects for their survival, which gives them a central role in culture in organizations.

In order to be competitive, companies need to constantly align adaptation to external changes and integration of internal processes (e.g., Salaman, 2001, cit. in Rebelo, 2006). The organization (that is, its employees and processes) needs to be well integrated in order to assure an adequate response to environmental changes. In other words, it is not effective to be exclusively oriented towards following clients' or competitors' movements or the environment if the organization cannot efficiently rearrange itself internally to respond to the necessary changes.

In the dynamics between internal integration and external adaptation, learning processes play a central role. Thus, orientation towards learning must be present on a daily basis in the organization in order to allow the assimilation of new information by the organizational members and an adequate internal reorganization (Rebelo, 2006). This is what learning organizations ultimately look at as a way to gain competitiveness (Easterby-Smith, Lyles & Tsang, 2008; Garvin, 2000).

Knowledge Management and Organizational Culture

Whereas the learning culture, as mentioned above, refers essentially to the existing attitudes, values and behaviors that allow for continuous learning in organizations, Knowledge Management (KM) can be considered a process of leveraging knowledge as the means of achieving innovation in processes and products/services, effective decision making, and organizational adaptation to the market (Yahya & Goh, 2002). Generally, it can also be defined as an approach to add or create value through the activation of know-how, of experience inside and outside the organisation (Ruggles, 1998).

Knowledge Management implies a set of actions and activities related to knowledge, using specific tools and techniques, in such a way that knowledge is available when the organization needs to solve problems or find solutions (Du, Ai, & Ren, 2007).

KM can also be seen as a system that enhances an organization's learning through facilitation of knowledge (both tacit and explicit)

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