



## Organizational learning as a strategic resource in supply management

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### Abstract

This study considers the potential role of organizational learning as a strategic resource in supply management. A model of learning in supply management processes is examined using samples representing three nodes of one *Fortune 500* organization's supply chains (internal SBU customers,  $n = 141$ ; corporate buyers,  $n = 115$ , and external suppliers,  $n = 58$ ). Organizational learning is viewed as a composite construct arising from four tangible indicators: team-, systems-, learning-, and memory-orientations (each of those orientations is measured with four to five items). The results indicate that learning has a positive effect on a set of learning consequences, supply management consequences, management consequences, and performance consequences.

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### 1. Introduction

Understanding the determinants of success in the supply management process is a key goal of the operations management field (cf. [Spekman et al., 1994](#)). Given this goal, it is surprising that a theory aimed at explaining supply management success has not yet

made significant inroads in this field. In this study, we argue that the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm offers a promising theoretical foundation to help explain supply management success. The RBV posits that organizations can improve performance through amassing and utilizing “strategic” assets and capabilities ([Chi, 1994](#); [Wernerfelt, 1984](#)). Strategic resources are those that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate ([Barney, 1991](#)). Growing bodies of work in both strategic management and marketing argue that firms possessing such resources can develop competitive advantages over rivals lacking such resources, and can leverage these advantages to gain sustained superior performance (e.g., [Chatterjee and Wernerfelt, 1991](#);

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Hunt and Morgan, 1995). Although operations management scholars recognize the general importance of resources to the supply management function (e.g., Handfield, 1993), the value of strategic resources remains unclear.

This paper examines the role of organizational learning as a strategic resource in supply management. We broadly define learning as the values and beliefs associated with the development of new knowledge that has the potential to influence behavior. Our definition follows the insights of Huber (1991, p. 89), who notes: “an entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviors is changed.” Given supply management processes’ complex and dynamic nature (Choi et al., 2001), they represent an area in which learning can create competitive advantages (Hult et al., 2000); learning in this context can be viewed as a form of supply management orientation (cf. Shin et al., 2000). Conversely, a corporation’s ability to provide value to external customers can be severely impeded by a dysfunctional supply management system (Bowersox et al., 1999; Narasimhan and Jayaram, 1998).

Specifically, we depict learning as an intangible resource that is deeply embedded in the fabric of the supply management system. Consistent with this

intangibility, learning is conceptualized as a composite construct that arises from four more tangible “orientations”—team-, systems-, learning-, and memory-orientations (e.g., Hult, 1998). Additionally, as a strategic resource, learning is proposed to influence several measures of success in the supply management process (cf. Barney, 1986; Dyer and Singh, 1998). We examine these relationships using data from three nodes (internal customers of the firm’s strategic business units (SBUs), corporate buyers, and external suppliers) involved in supply management processes of a *Fortune 500* transportation firm. The remainder of this paper presents the theoretical framework and hypotheses, the three samples, the analyses and results, and discussion of the implications of the study.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Fig. 1 identifies the constructs and main relationships examined. As shown, *learning* is depicted as a composite construct arising from the tangible first-order indicators of *team-*, *systems-*, *learning-*, and *memory-orientations*. Specifically, the proclivity of the supply management participants (internal SBU customers, corporate buyers, and external

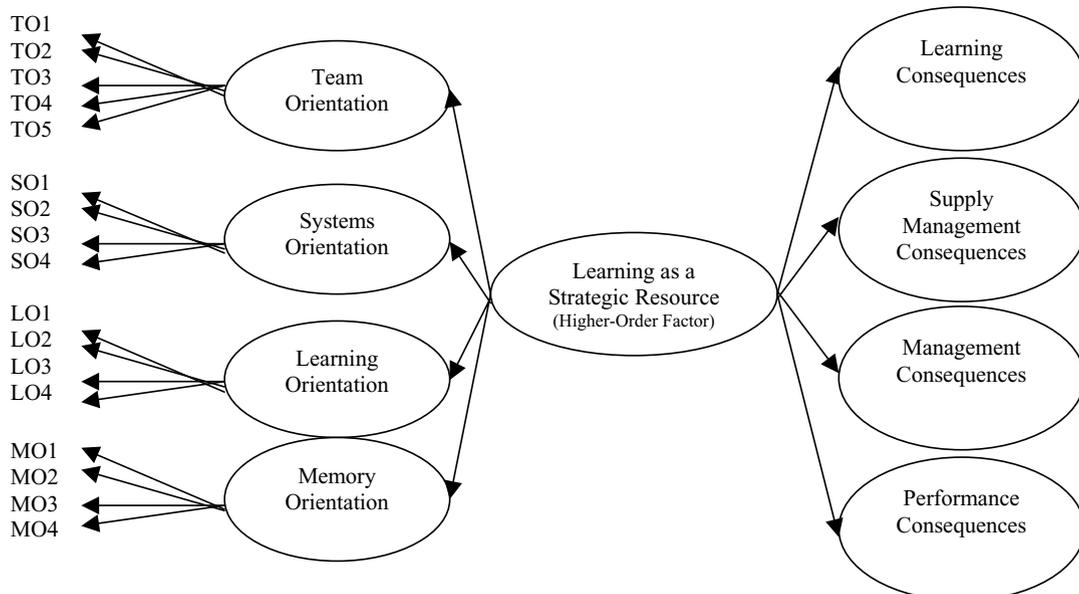


Fig. 1. Organizational learning as a strategic resource in the supply management process.

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