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Tourism Management 25 (2004) 421–428

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Qualitative knowledge capturing and organizational learning: two case studies in Taiwan hotels

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Received 10 October 2002; accepted 7 May 2003

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the extent to which two selected hotels implement the practice of knowledge capturing and organizational learning, in order to improve levels of customer satisfaction. Usually, the best practice of organizational learning is that individuals identify, collect, and apply appropriate and useful information (i.e. the process of knowledge capturing); and then their companies, through the process of collective learning, convert this information to valued organizational knowledge. This capturing and learning process is a continuous flow. Theoretically individuals and their companies might benefit from this process. Semi-structured interviews in two hotels in Taiwan provide detailed and verbatim data showing that individual learning and knowledge capturing need to be triggered to develop organizational learning.

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Keywords: Hotel industry; Customer satisfaction; Organizational learning; Knowledge capturing

1. Introduction

Most hoteliers focus on the enhancement of customer services and the retention of customer loyalty. To achieve these goals, they attempt to continuously understand what customers need and want. However, sometimes these goals are difficult to achieve since consumer behavior changes all the time. Interestingly, as companies apply the concept of organizational learning to their operations, achievement of these goals might be enriched. Learning, including internal learning and external learning, is a vital prerequisite for the development of organizational learning. Learners may not benefit in the future from a certain learning process unless they capture appropriate skills and knowledge, and the collective learning process is taken on.

In this paper, knowledge capturing is defined as the process of collecting and identifying useful information (i.e. knowledge acquisition), exploiting and usefully applying knowledge (i.e. knowledge leverage) and disseminating it through the whole organization (i.e.

knowledge transfer) (cf. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Organizational learning, according to Garvin (1993), is defined as “the process of improving action through better knowledge and understanding” (p. 80). In other words, organizational learning is a process of enabling a company to transfer information to valued knowledge, which in turn, enriches organizational capability of adapting to environmental demands. It seems that this learning process is a vital part of generating and applying knowledge; and the concept of organizational learning and knowledge capturing are intertwined and interrelated.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate the content of new skills and knowledge which employees learn and capture in two researched hotels and to explore some key approaches which are utilized for capturing knowledge. Semi-structured interviews were administered in this study. The findings clearly indicate that individual learning needs to be further triggered, in order to proceed to organizational learning. Results suggest that top management staff need to seriously take the effect of organizational learning into account and furthermore, to implement this concept in reality, in order to advance the greater level of customer service and overall organizational performance and effectiveness.

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2. Fundamental theory

2.1. Types of knowledge

There is a significant difference between individual knowledge and organizational knowledge. Individual knowledge could be defined as comprehensive interpretations and syntheses of information being gathered, by applying individual talent, past experience, and competences. According to Bhatt (2000, p. 18), “organizational knowledge is individually shared knowledge that individuals come to understand and interpret in a particular organizational context.” These two types of knowledge contribute to the overall organizational competitiveness and performance through effectively capturing and transferring individual and organizational knowledge and developing organizational capability (Sena & Shani, 1999; Bollinger & Smith, 2001).

According to Caddy, Guthrie, and Petty (2001), companies have to be aware of the need to totally control and utilize their internal knowledge resources. If this knowledge could not be completely managed by the organizations, this ‘missing and hoarding’ knowledge would become orphaned. If staff possess orphan knowledge without sharing it, when they are off-duty, are transferred to other positions or depart for other companies, this knowledge will be invisibly transformed into knowledge lost. In addition, external knowledge resources need to be included. The potential knowledge, which may become orphaned, includes customer, competitor, supplier, and government knowledge, and any other source incurred by the external environment.

2.2. Knowledge capturing

Usually knowledge capturing refers to the acquisition and retrieval of quantitative data, using statistical computer packages, which is then used to assist in decision-making and strategic planning. Knowledge capturing is, however, redefined to also include a fundamental qualitative element of knowledge management and organizational learning. Individuals acquire or capture knowledge and may retrieve that knowledge in the service of their organizations if the organizational environment enables this process. If this does not occur then organizational learning cannot proceed.

An example of capturing knowledge from customers is that Ritz Carton Chain Hotels reinforces customer loyalty by means of detecting and recording their guest special interests at the first-time visit and providing personalized treatment based on the records afterwards (Davenport, Harris, & Kohli, 2001). This reinforces customer loyalty. This operational system enables employees to leverage knowledge between acquired

knowledge from its customers and its existing organizational knowledge.

According to Caddy et al. (2001), after staff gain knowledge from any source and/or develop new ways of tackling routines, organizational knowledge needs to be created, in order to further enhance the organizational performance. If this process has not been pursued, the potential knowledge could run off when these staff members leave the firm (no matter whether they are off duty or leave the current position and/or job). In other words, an organization provides opportunities for employees to transfer their new learning and perspectives with others, as the transferring process is the only way to sustain the process of organizational learning. Otherwise, without this process, there is only individual learning, not organizational learning.

2.3. Types of learning process

Argyris and Schon (1978) differentiate three types of learning process, including single-loop, double-loop, and deuterio-loop learning. No adjustment of the existing competences and operational methods takes place in the single-loop learning since there is an assumption of the optimization of its competences and methods. The nature of this learning type is adaptive; on the other hand, double- and deuterio-loop learning are generative. The *think* phase is added in the double and deuterio loop. According to Wilson (2000), “improving our ability to think is the cornerstone of knowledge management, and the centerpiece of all knowledge transfer practices” (p. 377). The *continuous improvement* is the process of double-loop learning by removing defective methods and improving insufficient competences. The deuterio-loop learning is based on *changing* those methods, which are obsolete, with the requirement of individual reflection on its mental models. The *reflection* component reinitiates the learning cycle. It will lead to new levels of thinking and creation of knowledge, and to overstripping the previous learning phase (Spinello, 2000). The last type would result in the generating of new discoveries and knowledge (Eskildsen, Dahlgard, & Norgaard, 1999).

Acquiring knowledge from the internal learning may be through learning from others’ experience, organizational knowledge and organizational repository (such as documents and database). Learning from the external environment means collecting knowledge from alliance partners, competitors, competitors’ customers and suppliers, government bodies, headquarters, any kinds of media, and so on (Ordóñez de Pablo, 2002).

2.4. Organizational learning

The notion of individual learning is distinguished from the notion of organizational learning. According

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