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Influence of support leadership and teamwork cohesion on organizational learning, innovation and performance: an empirical examination

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of organizational learning and teamwork cohesion have on organizations' capacity to use innovation (technical and administrative) to meet the changing needs of their environment. The paper verifies how certain characteristics of the firm (support leadership and teamwork cohesion) significantly affect both learning and innovation, as well as showing the implications of these in organizational performance. Using empirical data gathered from 202 Chief Executive Officers in Spanish firms, the findings support the hypotheses that (1) support leadership encourages teamwork cohesion, organizational learning, and technical and administrative innovation; (2) teamwork cohesion promotes organizational learning and this, in turn, encourages technical and administrative innovation; and (3) organizational performance is improved through teamwork cohesion, organizational learning and technical and administrative innovation. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

An overview of innovation literature shows that few topics have enjoyed a greater consensus among researchers than the current importance given to innovation. Innovation is a strategic option for improving the organization and making it more competitive. At the same time, it opens the doors to competitive advantage both in global and international markets (Hitt et al., 1997; Tidd, 2001) by (1) providing the marketplace with new or unique products/services; (2) creating entry barriers that make learning the necessary resources to develop innovation more difficult; (3) creating new values that re-write the rules of competitive play. For these reasons, the *Cotec Foundation (1996: 160)* declares that "in a global market, many other factors intervene in the concept of competitiveness, not only macroeconomic, but also social, political or institutional, but when the economic, institutional and political conditions are relatively similar, innovation becomes a determining factor in corporate competitiveness."

Likewise, both in academic and in professional circles, there is a great deal of proof concerning the relevance that learning is taking on. True though it may be that humans are learners by nature and that this learning has always been present, we cannot deny the fact that, today, learning is more of a need than a choice. In organizations, learning is at the heart of company management and has become the essence of productive activity. No organization will admit to ignoring learning, since this would be akin to accepting the start of its demise.

The importance of both approaches in the current context calls for an examination of the relationship between learning and innovation. Both variables can be seen as a response to changes in the environment and as the basis for obtaining competitive advantages (Holt, 1999). Most studies consider that learning injects new ideas into the organization, increases the capacity to understand new ideas and strengthens creativity and the ability to spot new opportunities; in other words, it favours the presence of innovation (Damanpour, 1991). In fact, numerous organizational learning models have been successfully applied to specific aspects of the innovative process and firms are increasingly beginning to give new meaning to the term innovation: as a process of organizational learning.

However, although the arguments are mainly coincident as regards the positive relation between learning and innovation, this link has not been substantially looked at

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from an empirical standpoint. Furthermore, the research studies have basically concentrated on analysing the effects learning has on the various types of innovation, without examining how learning affects organizations' capacity to fit to their environment through the use of innovation. Innovation allows organizations to change in line with the change operating in their environment; in other words, innovation is a strategic option for responding to the new challenges of an environment subjected to change and uncertainty. Likewise, there is a need to analyse the principal characteristics organizations should have if they wish to learn, since there is a lack of scientifically sound empirical studies that provide any in-depth knowledge on the matter.

For this reason, the objective of this paper is to further examine the relationship between organizational learning and innovation (a reflection of organizations' capacity to fit to their environment), and to verify how support leadership and teamwork cohesion significantly affect both learning and innovation. Finally, the paper analyses the implications of organizational learning and innovation on organizational performance.

2. Organizational learning and innovation

In recent years the ability of organizations to respond suitably to changes in the external environment has been a central topic of organizational studies. Long-term survival, competitiveness and achieving greater performance all depend on organizations' capacity to match the continuous changes in the external environment. For this reason, both organizational theory and strategic management have concentrated their research efforts on the interaction between the environment and its organization. Organizational theory considers that the organization's structure and processes should adapt to the environment. On the contrary, however, strategic management concentrates on the fit between the environment and the organization's strategy.

In turn, various authors, such as Aragón-Correa and Sharma (2002) and Brio and Junquera (2003), point out that different changes in the environment require different degrees of fit. Thus, the organization's responses to its environment can be classified along a continuum, at the extremes of which are, on the one hand, the defensive stance and, on the other, the proactive strategy. A defensive strategy implies that firms deliberately create stability by means of decisions and actions that reduce the organization's interaction with its environment. Opposed to this is the proactive strategy, which implies that the organization is constantly in search of new market opportunities that generate changes in its environment and force competitors to respond to these changes, in order to maintain its long-term competitiveness.

The various types of fit are viable alternatives for managing environmental changes. However, not all types

are equally immune. In a context that is characterized by the dynamism of the competition and the markets, a proactive fit provides greater immunity to environmental changes, since this type of organization constantly keeps in pace with the change and, frequently, brings about that change (Miles and Snow, 1978). From the point of view of innovation, a proactive strategy implies the constant search for and introducing of new ideas, products, services, systems, policies, programs and processes before other firms in the environment. We can call this the innovation gap. In our study, we aim to operationalize this innovation gap through the difference between the firm's and the environment's innovation. However, in order to sustain and uphold the innovation introduced by the environment in a comparative framework, it has to be related to the idea of excellent firms within the sector the organization operates.

Likewise, so as to tackle the changes existing in the environment, organizations also need to develop a series of specific capabilities and to regenerate their essential competences. From among these resources and capabilities that are specific to the firm, a key role in achieving competitive advantages is played by the intangibles. And, in turn, of all the intangibles, learning, one of the most important capabilities in the society of knowledge, stands out for its highly strategic role.

In the same line, implementing this organizational learning requires a series of characteristics allowing firms to develop the learning processes and, ultimately, become intelligent organizations. Intelligent organizations have a series of structural, strategic, human-resource-related and general aspects that are characteristics and that set them apart from other organizations. Of the human-resource-related aspects, we shall concentrate on support leadership and teamwork cohesion.

For an organization to become intelligent it must have a support leadership, which means having a leader who possesses a series of transformational characteristics, including being a good designer, master, mentor, challenger, catalyzer and integrator, as well as having a clear, sustained shared vision. This leader must support and encourage innovation, individual initiative, through the construction of competences centered on learning, on open communications that minimize the costs of internal change and on the creation of cohesion in teamwork. This teamwork cohesion should be seen as the cohesion among a group of people, all of whom have a series of complementary capabilities, are responsible and are committed to a purpose, approach and objectives that are common to all. Through teamwork cohesion, the organization will manage to convert organizational learning into a trait that is valuable to the whole organization and not only to its specific individuals. For this reason, management, through its support, should encourage collaboration and the creation of cohesed work teams that promote the learning organization.

Finally, we should underline the fundamental role of the CEO (Dooley and O'Sullivan, 2003). Although numerous

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