



Transforming hotels into learning organisations: a new strategy for going global

Serkan Bayraktaroglu*, Rana Ozen Kutanis

Department of Management, The Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Sakarya University, 54040 Sakarya, Turkey

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Abstract

Organisational learning and the learning organisation are concepts that have attracted a considerable amount of attention over the last two decades. This paper provides an analysis and evaluation of the main perspectives on organisational learning, particularly in relation to hotels as service sector organisations. The issues involved are an evaluation of the transformation process of a hospitality organisation and the key success factors to becoming a learning organisation in order to develop and maintain a competitive advantage within the global challenge. It identifies the issues which appear to be of prime importance when introducing organisational learning into hotels.

The focus of this paper will be on the key points of the Turkish tourism sector's strengths and weaknesses in the adventure of becoming a learning organisation. Following of a literature review within which different characteristics of the service sector will be summarised learning organisation issues pertaining to Turkey will be discussed. This paper aims to discover future opportunities for the sustainable development of Turkish Tourism. However, this paper also maintains that, although organisational learning may be an important factor in building an organisation's competitiveness, by itself, it cannot guarantee success in today's fiercely competitive markets.

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1. Introduction

Though academic interest in how organisations learn dates back to at least the 1950s (see [Argyris, 1992](#)), it was only in the 1990s, through the work of writers such as [Senge \(1991\)](#) and [Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell \(1991\)](#), that the topic has attracted significant attention in recent years. In part, this is because there are two overlapping and competing concepts: organisational learning and the learning organisation ([West, 1994](#)). As [Tsang \(1997\)](#) notes, the tendency to use these two concepts interchangeably complicates our understanding of how learning takes place in organisations. Tsang also points out that, despite the volume of publications on the subject, there is a scarcity of rigorous empirical research in the area. He argues that one of the main reasons for this is that many of those writing on

organisational learning are practitioners seeking to prescribe rather than describe or analyse. He believes that, as well as promoting the concept, they are trying to promote themselves and the organisations for which they work. A similar point is also made by [Easterby-Smith \(1997, p.1107\)](#): 'much of the existing research into learning organisations is based on case studies of organisations that are said to be successful, and these sometimes seem to rely more on public relations than on any grounded studies'. Examples of successful learning organisations are Motorola, Shell, Xerox, Honda, Sony, Kodak and Rover Group UK and the case studies reflect only a picture of the 'best practices' in a limited period of time. For example, one of the best examples of a learning organisations in the literature is Rover Group, UK which has not been performing well financially and the 'learning organisation image' of the company was based on the compliments of the ex-workers or stakeholders of the company ([Bayraktaroglu, 2001](#)).

Despite this confusion, promoting learning within organisations is increasingly seen as vital to sustaining

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +90-264-346-03-34; fax: +90-264-346-03-32.

E-mail address: serkanb@sakarya.edu.tr (S. Bayraktaroglu).

and creating a competitive advantage (Easterby-Smith, 1997). However, if organisations are to successfully adopt the learning approach to competitiveness, they need to understand both the theory and practice of organisational learning. In turn, taking Tsang's (1997) point into account, the evidence on practice must be based on rigorous empirical research. This paper seeks to address these issues by discussing how hotels (as examples of hospitality organisations) can transform themselves into organised learning environments to improve their competitiveness. The focus of this paper will be the Turkish tourism sector's strengths and weaknesses in the adventure of becoming a learning organisation. To explore the specific circumstances of organisational learning in a service sector, the different characteristics of the service sector will be summarised to enable us to move into the Turkish Tourism scene. This paper aims to discover a direction for the Turkish Tourism Sector, which is perceived as a model for the sustainable development of the Turkish Economy as a whole. The inclusion of learning organisations on sustainable tourism development arose from a recognition that the tourism sector is very labour-intensive and in today's business world the most valuable assets are 'information and knowledge' and 'the human factor'. Thus, the coming together of these concepts creates an undeniable logic. As a result, this study is an attempt to bring two human-centred settings together: 'learning organisations' and 'hotels' as examples of service sector organisations. This paper will conclude by identifying fundamental issues when building organisational learning (especially in the hospitality industry) and it is hoped that this study will contribute towards an advanced understanding of how to enhance competitiveness and the success level of the tourism sector.

2. Organisational learning and the learning organisation

Before moving onto further theoretical issues, it would be useful to differentiate between two frequently-mixed concepts. The term 'organisational learning' is often used interchangeably with the term 'learning organisation'. The difference, as Tsang (1997, pp. 74–5) points out is that: 'Organisational learning is a concept used to describe certain types of activity that take place in an organisation while the learning organisation refers to a particular type of organisation in and of itself'.

In effect, the difference appears to be between 'becoming' and 'being'. Organisational learning describes attempts by organisations to *become* learning organisations by promoting learning in a conscious, systematic and synergistic fashion which involves every single person in the organisation. In other words, 'a learning organisation is the highest state of organisational learning, in which an organisation has achieved

the ability to transform itself continuously through the development and involvement of all its members (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Burgoyne, Pedler, & Boydell, 1995; West, 1994). The term 'learning organisation' was much promoted in the late 1980s and early 1990s; however, because very few appear to have achieved this status, 'organisational learning' now seems to have been adopted as a more appropriate concept.

Even if consensus has emerged on what to *call* it, there is still much disagreement as to what organisational learning *means*. Stata (1989) offers a simple definition, stating that learning means 'getting everyone in the organisation to accept and embrace change as an ongoing process'. However, Stata (1989, p. 64) then goes on to argue that organisational learning occurs 'through shared insights, knowledge and mental models and builds on past knowledge and experience, that is, on memory'. So, organisational learning is about 'organisational memory' as well as its members' cognitive and mental models. Garvin (1993) views organisational learning as a complex and multi-dimensional process that unfolds over time, and which links the acquisition of knowledge acquisition to improved performance; while Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 803), who are among the most influential and the earliest commentators on organisational learning, state that 'organisational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understandings'. Argyris (1977), a pioneer of the conceptualisation of organisational learning, makes a similar point by suggesting that 'learning is a process of detecting and correcting error'. Lastly, Huber (1991, p. 89), taking a systematic approach, argues that 'an entity learns, if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviours is changed'. The main difference between writers in the area appears to be those taking a *prescriptive* approach, who consider that behavioural change is required for learning, and those focusing more on *descriptive* or *analytical* studies, who suggest that new ways of thinking are sufficient (West, 1994).

Synthesising both the prescriptive and descriptive approaches, Garvin (1993) suggests that, while a variety of phenomena contribute to the organisational learning process, unless there are adjustments to the way in which work is organised and performed, significant change and learning is unlikely to occur. Following on his analysis, he (1993, p. 80) offers the following definition of a learning organisation:

A learning organisation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. New knowledge creation can occur as a result of insight or inspiration from within the organisation; additionally it can also be provoked from external influences by expanding and/or

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