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## Human capital and human resource management to achieve ambidextrous learning: A structural perspective

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**Abstract** Organisational learning has become increasingly important for strategic renewal. Ambidextrous organisations are especially successful in the current environment, where firms are required to be efficient and adapt to change. Using a structural approach, this study discusses arguments about the nature of ambidexterity and identifies the kinds of human capital that better support specific learning types and HRM practices suited to these components of human capital. Results highlight learning differences between marketing and production units, as well as different HRM practices and human capital orientations. This study points out that human capital mediates between HRM practices and learning.

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## Introduction

Organisational learning has become increasingly important as a mechanism for strategic renewal (Kang and Snell, 2009). Currently, growing competitiveness and rapid changes require firms to learn new guidelines in order to compete.

Most research on organisational learning focuses on two alternative approaches: exploration and exploitation.

Exploration involves learning outside a firm's current knowledge domains, whereas exploitation involves refining and extending a firm's existing knowledge stocks (March, 1991). Exploration and exploitation tap into different administrative routines and managerial behaviours (Lubatkin et al., 2006) and compete for firms' scarce resources, so that the firm must manage trade-offs between the two, in what is called ambidextrous learning. Since an organisation that engages exclusively in exploration will ordinarily never gain the returns of its knowledge, and an organisation that engages exclusively in exploitation will ordinarily suffer from obsolescence, exploitation and exploration are complementary; the basic problem facing an organisation is to engage in sufficient exploitation to ensure its current viability and, at the same time, devote enough energy

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to exploration to ensure its future viability (Levinthal and March, 2003; Prieto et al., 2009). Ambidexterity is the organisation's ability to address two organisational incompatible objectives equally well (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013): ambidextrous organisations are aligned and efficient in their management of today's business demands while simultaneously adapting to changes in the environment (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996).

Organisational ambidexterity is a paradigm which need more studies to clarify its meaning and focus (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008). One of the main concerns is how organisations engage in both exploration and exploitation, and how this may be crucial for the organisational ambidexterity-performance relationship (Junni et al., 2013; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008; He and Wong, 2004; Katila and Ahuja, 2002). There are different approaches to consider ambidexterity. Structural ambidexterity proposes to create separate structures for different types of activities, because the two sets of activities, routines and mindsets are so dramatically different (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Contextual ambidexterity suggests individual employees can make choices between alignment-oriented and adaptation-oriented activities in the context of their day-to-day work (Kang and Snell, 2009; Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004). Finally, a third approach consists on a sequential ambidexterity, where organisations shift temporally between periods of exploitation and exploration (Burgelman, 2002).

Although this paper explores ambidexterity from a structural angle, do not discard the presence of both explorative and exploitative learning in all the organisational units. The two approaches of learning are possible in every department, but we propose that its presence and importance will differ attending the characteristics of the organisational units. That is, different organisational areas or units may require mainly a different type of organisational learning depending on their activities. Therefore, this article contributes to the literature by identifying the differences between the two approaches of learning, and their importance considering distinct organisational units.

A second aspect that leads us to adopt the structural perspective is to consider that each organisational unit may require a different human capital composition, with different skills, characteristics and ways of managing. This approach is contrary to Kang and Snell (2009), who understand that all people can change their behaviour towards one or another type of learning. Hence, the purpose of this paper is also to identify the most appropriate HRM practices to manage these differing components of HC. It can be expected that a firm should have at least two different HRM systems and that they may foster different learning types. There is little theoretical and empirical evidence about the relationships between these variables, and our aim is to fill this gap. Previous researchers have considered training and development, performance appraisal and compensation practices (Lepak and Snell, 2002; Schuler and Jackson, 2005), and we take these practices into account because they may strongly influence HC and organisational learning.

Our findings make four contributions to the existing literature. First, we discuss the arguments about the nature of an ambidextrous organisation and compare approaches to

learning in two departments in each organisation. Second, we identify the HC characteristics that best support different learning types, connecting specialist and generalist HC with exploration and exploitation respectively; and, third, we set out HRM practices that are consistent with the components of HC. Lastly, we show that HC mediates between HRM practices and organisational learning.

The paper is structured in five sections. Following the introduction, section two introduces the conceptual framework of ambidexterity, and section three explicates the role of HC and HRM in the different approaches to learning. We then describe our research methods and results, and state our conclusions.

## Ambidextrous organisations

Various scholars have argued that successful organisations are ambidextrous: they generate competitive advantages through revolutionary and evolutionary change (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996), or exploratory and exploitative innovation (Benner and Tushman, 2003; Jansen et al., 2009). Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) consider that ambidextrous firms can both compete in mature markets (where cost, efficiency, and incremental innovation are critical) and develop new products and services for emerging markets (where experimentation, speed, and flexibility are critical). They are therefore likely to achieve better performance than firms emphasising one at the expense of the other.

The concept of ambidexterity is also implicit in the more recent conceptualisation of dynamic capabilities put forward by Eisenhardt and Martin (2000), who suggest that these capabilities require a blend of the strategic logics of exploration and exploitation. Jansen and colleagues (2009) consider organisational ambidexterity to be a dynamic capability that goes beyond moving from one configuration of competences to another, but rather addresses multiple, inconsistent demands simultaneously. According to Katila and Ahuja (2002) and Hammady et al. (2013), exploitation of existing capabilities is often needed to explore new capabilities, and exploration of new capabilities also enhances a firm's existing knowledge base.

Focusing solely on exploration can lead to failure if firms never collect the profits of their investments (Levinthal and March, 2003). It can also lead firms to neglect improvement and the adaptation of existing routines (March, 1991). However, focusing completely on exploitation can have negative side-effects too. Organisations that engage solely in exploitation will suffer from obsolescence (Levinthal and March, 2003) and are likely to find themselves trapped in a suboptimal stable balance (March, 1991). These assumptions lead us to establish our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Ambidextrous firms will perform better than non-ambidextrous firms.

Even though different organisational units may require different types of organisational learning and may operate independently. They are organisationally interdependent with regard to the achievement of ambidexterity thus, firms must coordinate exploitation and exploration to achieve simultaneity through a shared vision (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013, 2007; Jansen et al., 2009), senior management team

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