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A model of the effects of technical consultants on organizational learning in high-technology purchase situations

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Abstract

Despite the fact that it is widely acknowledged that both organizational learning and the purchasing of high-technology products are important areas for study, it is surprising to find that little, if any, research has explicitly linked them together. Accordingly, the major motivation of this study is to begin to address this gap in the literature by developing a model that is based on a review of the extensive literature on organizational buying behavior, organizational information search, and organizational learning. Moreover, a key contribution of this research is to incorporate the effects that outside technical consultants are likely to have on the processes of information search and organizational learning in firms purchasing high-technology products. The inclusion of the effects of consultants is important because many scholars argue that such hired experts are likely to have a pronounced effect on organizational learning in a variety of high-technology contexts.

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1. Introduction

The term “organizational learning” appears to have been used first in 1963 by [Cyert and March](#) in their seminal study of the behavioral aspects of organizational decision making.

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However, the topic of organizational learning did not gain much further attention from researchers until the late 1970s when it started to become a focus of activity for a few organizational theorists (e.g., Argyris, 1977; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Jelinek, 1979). Though research activity did increase in the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that the topic became a central one in a variety of management disciplines such as strategy, and production management (Easterby-Smith, 1997).

Similarly, scholars in the field of marketing have only recently begun to explicitly address this topic. Though early studies did examine the closely related areas concerning the use of market information (e.g., Deshpande & Zaltman, 1987) and knowledge utilization (Menon & Varadarajan, 1992), Sinkula's (1994) was the first study to explicitly examine organizational learning by linking this concept to that of market information processing. A short time after, Slater and Narver (1995) linked the concept of the learning organization¹ (as opposed to the concept of organizational learning) to market orientation. Most recently, three studies have extended this work by focusing on how organizational learning relates to marketing channels (Lukas, Hult, & Ferrell, 1996), organizational buyer behavior (Hult & Nichols, 1996), and how market-based organizational learning is linked to values, knowledge, and behavior (Sinkula, Baker, & Noordewier, 1997).

In the research presented here, the central focus is on the link between “information search” and “organizational learning” in high-technology purchase situations. Because such situations are information intensive (Weiss & Heide, 1993), there should be ample opportunity for firms to acquire new information and knowledge so that there is significant potential for organizational learning to take place. Importantly, the effects that external consultants are likely to have on information search and organizational learning are also incorporated in the conceptual model. The inclusion of the effects of consultants on search processes and organizational learning is predicated on the grounds that numerous theorists argue that learning from external consultants is likely to be a very important factor in the process of organizational learning (Cyert & March, 1992; Dixon, 1992; Huber, 1991; Menon & Varadarajan, 1992; Slater & Narver, 1995). In addition, although no empirical studies could be located that have examined the effects of consultants on organizational learning, there is a small but growing body of empirical evidence indicating that consultants have strong effects on search processes in organizations that have hired them to help make high-technology purchases (Dawes, 1996; Patterson & Dawes, 1999).

Moreover, the need to examine the effects of management consultants seems important because the use of these external experts in firms making IT purchase decisions is now so widespread. This is evidenced by the fact that for the first time in 1996, the 100 biggest U.S. accountancy firms earned more from consulting (\$8.3 billion) than they did from either auditing (\$7.9 billion) or tax (\$5 billion) (*The Economist*, 1997). In addition, and in response to the desire for firms to have technical advice when buying high-technology products, many of the largest suppliers of IT (e.g., IBM) have formed their own consulting arms. The critical

¹ Tsang (1997) argues that organizational learning is a concept used to describe certain types of activities that occur in an organization while the concept of the learning organization refers to a particular “type” of organization that is good at organizational learning.

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