
Linking organisational learning to organisational performance and success: Singapore case studies

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Keywords

Interviewing, Learning, Performance indicators

Abstract

This paper addresses the development of organisational learning, which involves various groups of people and different stages. It further explores the link between organisational learning and performance outcomes, providing an insight into the various interpretations of organisational success associated with learning. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews and data were collected from four Singapore organisations from the private and public sectors. Data were subsequently analysed using qualitative techniques of content analysis, particularly within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, matrix displays and pattern matching. Findings addressed most of these issues adequately but revealed that there were several aspects on the linkage between learning and performance that had not been mentioned in the literature. The main contribution of this theory-building study is the development of an empirically confirmed, theoretical and practical model of the influences of organisational learning on organisational performance and success.

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Introduction

The concept of organisational learning has, in the past decade or so, begun to make an important contribution in organisational studies and management practice. It was in the 1980s that a few companies started realising the potential power of corporate learning for increasing organisational performance, competitiveness and success. It has been asserted that there is a need for organisations to learn faster and respond to the rapid change in the environment; otherwise, they simply will not survive (Heaton and Harung, 1999; Harung *et al.*, 1999; Garratt, 1999). Owen (1991) goes so far as to term learning the business of business. In this backdrop, this paper addresses the following research problem (RP) and research issues (RI):

RP: How and why does organisational learning influence organisational performance?

RI1: How is organisational learning developed?

RI2: How appropriate are the three stages of learning (i.e. single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning)?

RI3: What factors influence learning during the three stages?

RI4: How does organisational learning influence organisational performance?

The above questions are based on a theoretical framework on organisational learning and development, acting as a prior theory for this research (Yeo, 2002).

The theoretical framework is essentially founded on two significantly distinct, yet a common set of, principles for learning, that is, the perspectives of cognitive and behavioural learning (Cherrington, 1991).

This is motivated by the belief that organisational learning results from the understanding of changes that occur in the external environment and then the adaptation of beliefs and behaviour that are compatible with those changes. Inherent in the process are a new way of thinking, new attitudes and consequently a new pattern of behaviour brought about by organisational learning (Schein, 1999). Besides, there is a constant interaction between adaptive and generative trends that are characteristic of the behavioural and cognitive learning approach respectively. At the core of these approaches is the importance of promoting creative individualism within organisations so as to make people feel empowered. In turn, employees will be challenged to find better ways of meeting organisational goals and values (Schein, 1999; Robbins, 1994).

Behavioural perspective

In the behavioural perspective, learning is regarded as a process of modifying current behavioural patterns to respond to some immediate situation or experience. This perspective is associated with adaptive learning in that action is an expected outcome from some form of learning. There needs to be a change in the way an individual does something. Because learning takes place on the job as well as prior to it, organisational leaders are often concerned with the way they teach their employees to behave in ways that are most beneficial to the organisation. Leaders often attempt to mould individuals by guiding their learning process in gradual stages (Robbins, 1994). The behavioural learning perspective is derived from the behaviourist theory, suggesting that learning necessarily leads to the shaping of behaviour. According to prominent

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