

THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION IDEA IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Background. There is a terminological disorder regarding the concepts of organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge management. Two of these concepts are regarded as ambiguous.

Research aims. The article presents differences, resemblances and connections among organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge management. The main aim is to propose a framework of interrelationships among those three concepts.

Method. The research is based on the literature review and synthesis. It covers analysis and comparison of the essence of organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge management.

Key findings. The comparison indicates that the concepts are related and the learning organization idea can be understood with the application of organizational learning, knowledge management and organizational knowledge concepts.

Keywords: Organizational learning, Learning organization, Knowledge management, Organizational knowledge

INTRODUCTION

In the management literature there are three competing ideas that treat knowledge, organizational capacities, changes and their roles in creating a competitive advantage – i.e. organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge management. The first two are usually treated interchangeably, which introduced a terminological disorder that caused each of these two ideas to be regarded as ambiguous. In such circumstances, the knowledge management idea has emerged and gained appreciable popularity, especially among managers and consultants, displacing learning organization. However, it seems that all three concepts, although differentiate significantly, are based on the same assumptions and together compose a framework of developing and using knowledge in order to gain a competitive advantage and above average performance.

The argumentation presented in this paper is based on the literature review. The article presents differences, resemblances and connections among organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge man-

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agement. The main aim is to propose a framework of interrelationships among those three concepts.

REVIEW

Organizational Learning and Learning Organization

The differences between organizational learning and learning organization can be grouped into several areas (Örtenblad, 2001, pp. 125–133; Tsang, 1997, pp. 73–89). The first concerns the manner of presenting the concept and formulating research issues. The organizational learning is analysed from the descriptive perspective, trying to understand the specificity of learning by organizations, reasons why organizations learn, conditions that facilitate and impede learning and learning effects. While learning organization theory is perceived as normative (prescriptive), as its basic assumption concerns giving practical suggestions and solutions on how organizations should act in order to become “the learning organization”. Therefore, researchers in the field of organizational learning try to build a theory of the learning process in organizations (Crossan, Maurer, & White, 2011), while studies in the field of learning organization concentrate on discovering ideal form, shape, attributes that constitute such learning organization.

The analysis of the organizational learning definitions that have been published since the 1960s indicates how this concept evolved. Initially, learning by organizations was regarded as a simple mechanism of decision-makers reaction to the environmental changes which resulted in the changes of organizational members' behaviour (Cyert & March, 1963; Cangelosi & Dill, 1965, p. 200).

In those first definitions organizational learning was understood quite similarly to the learning of individuals from the behavioural perspective. As the management theories evolved (especially theory of the firm, organizational behaviour and strategic management), the organizational learning approach changed. Contemporarily, organizational learning is perceived as a process of organizational knowledge creation that influences the adaptational, innovative and developmental capacity of an organization (Shrivastava, 1983, pp. 7–28; Miller, 1996, p. 486, Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Slater & Narver, 1995, p. 63). Moreover, organizational learning is a social process (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Crossan et al., 1999) or an information processing process (Huber, 1991), that is rather complex (multi-level) (Kim, 1993; Coghlan, 1997; Crossan et al., 1999) and dynamic. The understanding of organizational learning using processes of information processing as Huber proposed is one of the links of organizational learning and knowledge management (Rebelo & Gomes 2008, p. 298). In the definitions, organizational learning phenomena is described from the perspective of processes or results, structure or subjects engaged in learning.



On the other hand, definitions of learning organization create a picture of an ideal organization. Senge (1989, p. 26) describes it as an organization with “developed capacity to continually enhance its capabilities and shape its own future”. In one interview he said, that: “At its core, a learning organization is a company, association, church, school or government agency that understands itself as a complex, organic system. It has a conscious vision and purpose. It is aware of its feedback systems and alignment mechanisms, and deliberate about the way it uses them” (Zemke, 1999, p. 41). Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1989, pp. 1-3) define learning organization in a narrower scope as “an organization that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself”. In other definitions, that are based on the Senge approach, there is a number of learning organization features – “an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin, 1993, p. 80), an organization skilled in identifying signals from the environment and in flexibly reacting to them (Czerska, Rutka, 1998; Rutka, 1996).

It can be said that learning organizations, in a way, have “organizational cleverness” that is based on experiences’ gathering, reliable analysis of successes and failures in order to notice and skilfully use opportunities and avoid pitfalls (Bratnicki, 1998, p. 107). Thus it learns, consciously drawing knowledge from every experience and from the way it gathers, processes and uses information acquired from each interaction with employees, clients, sellers, suppliers and even competitors.

The above mentioned differences between organizational learning and learning organization are also connected with the group of entities that are interested in those concepts. Organizational learning is the academics’ object of interest, while learning organization is more frequently used by consultants and business practitioners. Whereas academics concentrate on developing and verifying frameworks and models of organizational learning, the learning organization practitioners use case research methods analysing distinctive, long-living companies and an “action research” approach using their own consulting and application projects (Easterby-Smith, 1997, p. 1107).

Organizational learning is treated as a natural process, which should occur in every organization as it conditions organizational survival and growth. Organizational learning, however, is not always effective nor leads to positive results (there are situations that an organization learns inappropriate things). Therefore this process is still studied by academics in order to reveal its specificity and then maximize the possibilities of gaining positive effects. On the other hand, the learning organization idea assumes a conscious, deliberate building of such an organization, which will be “creating its own future”, skilled in constant and effective learning. The



learning organization is like an ideal form, that is created and should be applied in order to develop and sustain competitive advantage. Certain effort and action is needed thus to build a learning organization. Researchers who studied learning organizations pursue the identification of a full list of conditions, guidelines, and managerial practices, among which there are, for example: (a) a flat and flexible structure, (b) personnel with high levels of intellectual and moral capabilities, (c) an emphasis on continuous education and personnel development, (d) significant personnel empowerment, (e) teamwork, (f) informational openness, gaining and interpreting information from the environment, (g) a minimal specification of job descriptions, (h) supporting alliances with other organizations, (i) applying knowledge retention systems, (j) an ability to accept failures and learn from them, (k) system thinking, (l) introducing special funds for experimenting. Batorski (2000, p. 54), for example, identified 32 attributes of a learning organization based on literature studies. One of the reasons for the division of those two areas of interest is that in the opinion of academics the prescriptive writings on the learning organization “seldom pass the test of scientific rigor”, and the prescriptions are usually overgeneralized and groundless (Tsang, 1997, p. 84). On the other hand, in the opinion of managers the descriptive studies on organizational learning fail to generate useful, practical guidelines.

According to Nevis and DiBella (1997, pp. 3-18) there is too strong an aspiration to create one, universal, ideal model of learning organization. In their opinion every organization, in various ways, can become actively and consciously learning, because everyone has different learning style (profile). Therefore, they find creating a universal learning organization model as unfounded. Nevis and DiBella stated the necessity of finding organization-specific learning mechanisms and then, according to the discovered learning profile, improving learning capability or changing learning style, if necessary. Their proposal seems to link the two discussed above approaches to learning issues in organizations – descriptive and proscriptive ones.

In the same notion is the proposition of integrating organizational learning and learning organization suggested by Tsang (1997). He suggests to start with the descriptive perspective of learning in organizations, i.e. first understand learning style, determinants, mediators, formulate prescriptions based on descriptive studies which should be verified using an action research approach (Tsang, 1997, pp. 85-86).

The organizational learning concept is in the second phase of the concept development (using the Reichers and Schneider concept development model) as authors still fail to converge on well-accepted definitions of organizational learning and a consensual model of learning organization (Rebelo & Gomes, 2008, p. 300). Robelo and Gomes (2008) suggest that



nowadays learning in, and by organizations is not a question of fashion but a question of survival on the market, the integration of the organizational learning and learning organization research areas is important. Therefore there is need for consensus on what is learning in, and by organizations and research on organizational factors that promote and facilitate learning.

Knowledge Management

The knowledge management concept concentrates on the knowledge resources in an organization and their best application. The organizational knowledge in another two concepts was treated rather as a component of learning, while in knowledge management knowledge resources play the central role.

Among the concepts discussed in the paper, knowledge management is the youngest. It was introduced as a response to the growing need of organizations connected with problems of knowledge capturing, preserving, localising and applying (Alavi & Leidner, 2001, pp. 113–114). Some researchers even suggested that knowledge management, which like learning organization is regarded as a practical concept, ousts the learning organization, especially from the academic literature. Knowledge management offers more precise methods, technics, advice that could be applied by companies, whereas learning organization is rather like an “intangible formation” (Loermans, 2002). There are two basic paradigms in knowledge management. The first one is a computation paradigm, where knowledge is understood as empirically validated facts and information technology plays the most important role in managing that knowledge. The second – organic paradigm, that is more encompassing, and takes into account individuals, employees, group dynamics, social network, organizational culture and explicit knowledge (facts) as well as tacit ones (Argote, 2005, p. 45). There is a notion of merging these two paradigms.

The resource approach to knowledge management is one out of three in this concept (Klincewicz, 2008, p. 82). According to this resource approach knowledge management gives procedures, practices, techniques that allow the effective managing of knowledge resources in an organization. In the handbooks of knowledge management, knowledge management is simply defined as “doing what is needed to get the most out of knowledge resources” (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2010, p. 4). Swann et al. define knowledge management as “any process or practice of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing and using knowledge, wherever it resides, to enhance learning and performance in an organization” (Loermans, 2002, p. 286). This definition captures not only sub-processes connected with managing knowledge, but also objectives of knowledge management and the necessity of managing different types of knowledge (wherever it resides). In the literature among the processes connected with knowledge



management there are: (a) acquiring, (b) creating, (c) developing, (d) localising, (e) capturing, (f) sharing, (g) disseminating, (h) transferring, (i) using and (j) assessing knowledge assets (Probst, Raub, & Romhardt, 2002, p. 42; Morawski, 2005, p. 79).

Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning and Learning Organization

The cohesive area for organizational learning, learning organization and knowledge management concepts is organizational knowledge. Contemporarily, there is a tendency of linking or even synergizing those concepts, especially the learning organization and knowledge management or the organizational learning and knowledge management. In this part of the paper some key areas linking these three concepts are discussed.

The reason why all three concepts developed separately was due to not taking knowledge into consideration in both the organizational learning (knowledge issues appeared just at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s) and learning organization concept (in many works authors indicated the role of knowledge, especially knowledge creation and dissemination, but it hasn't been distinguished). On the other hand, in knowledge management, learning initially wasn't perceived as a knowledge generation and creation process. More frequently it was assumed that an organization gains knowledge from other entities (acquiring not creating) (Loermans, 2002, p. 285-294). As a result organizational learning was analysed only from the social processes perspective (employee development, dialogue, teamwork, group dynamics, organizational climate and culture) and knowledge management – information processing and technology usage perspectives. The discussion on the essence of organizational knowledge and problems with knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer made knowledge management researchers include social aspects of knowledge management in organizations. Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001, p. 991) wrote: “managing organizational knowledge does not narrowly imply efficiently managing hard bits of information but, more subtly, sustaining and strengthening social practices. In knowledge management digitalization cannot be a substitute for socialization”. Moreover, researches noticed that the creation of organizational knowledge is a result of learning processes. Sarvary (1999, p. 95) singled out the organizational learning process as one of the sub-processes of knowledge management beside knowledge production and distribution. Some definitions of learning organization indicate relationships between the learning organization concept and knowledge management, for example, Garvin's (1993) framework describes the learning organization from the perspective of the processes of creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge. However, the learning organization is something more than



knowledge management as it is capable of modifying its behaviour to replicate knowledge (Ajmal, Kekale, & Takala 2009, s. 340).

Trying to summarize all three concepts from the perspective of their objectives, the key purpose of knowledge management is identifying knowledge resources that are in the possession of the organization and those that are needed but are lacking; appropriate organizing of those resources in order to make them accessible wherever they are needed; enabling and facilitating knowledge transfer and sharing in order to make knowledge applicable; and finally encoding and preserving knowledge to minimize knowledge loss with employee's leaving. The purpose of organizational learning from the knowledge perspective is creating organizational knowledge that is needed in order to adjust to the environmental changes and create strategic competences. Organizational learning processes enable the development of organizational knowledge that is an object of knowledge management, and enables the preserving of new knowledge in organizational operations. Knowledge management creates the infrastructure and social conditions to support new knowledge creation on an individual level and moving it on to a group, organizational and inter-organizational level. Koźmiński (2004, p. 111) summarizes that „the fundamental function of knowledge management tools is enabling and enhancing organizational learning processes”. Knowledge management without knowing and applying organizational learning specificity causes that the information processing perspective is overestimated without noticing cultural or social aspects (Panasiewicz, 2002, pp. 9–16).

Proposal of Interrelationships Among Learning Organization, Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management

All three analysed concepts are complementary, together forming a coherent idea of an organization that strives for the development of a sustained competitive advantage, where the learning organization concept embraces the other two. The learning organization is a specific type of organization that is skilled in conscious and effective organizational learning and managing its knowledge directed towards gaining and renewing a competitive advantage.

This proposal of the complementary approach to the learning organization, organizational learning and knowledge management is shown in Figure 1.

The proposed model of the interrelationships among organizational learning, knowledge management, and learning organization bases on the identification of inputs and outputs of every concept. Organizational knowledge and the putting of it into action are the bonding elements for all three concepts. For the organizational learning that occurs in the specific organizational context (usually understood as an organizational ability to



learn), inputs are information and performed actions (that also generate information). Information that initiates learning cycles and concerns signals/stimulus from the environment, feedback information about the individual, group or organizational performance as well as disseminated organizational knowledge (dotted lines on the picture). There are dual results for organizational learning, i.e. changes in the organizational knowledge and changes in organizational activities or systems (integrated learning). The sequence of changes in knowledge and behaviour differs from one situation to another. However, it is assumed that usually there are changes in the knowledge level/range first which in turn influence the modification of operations (new knowledge is embedded in the organization).

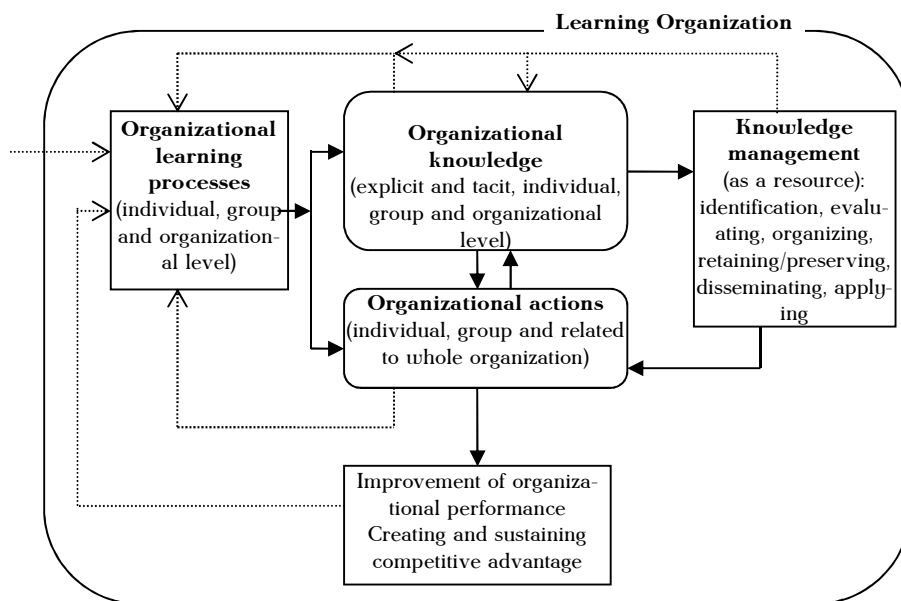


Figure 1. Interrelationships Among Organizational Learning, Knowledge Management, and Learning Organization

Source: own elaboration.

Organizational knowledge, while an output of learning, is an input and object of knowledge management. Knowledge management concentrates on knowledge needs identification, knowledge resources evaluation, organization, retaining, disseminating and applying. All the practices used by knowledge management and the effects (outputs) of knowledge management influence the future learning processes (e.g. creating a knowledge-sharing climate, showing areas of knowledge needs). This shows a strong connection between knowledge management and organizational learning.



If the learning processes are directed and stimulated, and the created and applied knowledge is aligned to the strategic direction of the organization and to environmental (internal and external) changes, this should finally lead to above average performance results (Stańczyk-Hugiet, 2005, pp. 210-211), it can be said that such an organization has become a learning one (Rokita, 2003). Without effective organizational learning and knowledge management that are aligned to the strategic needs of an organization there is no learning organization.

The proposed framework of interrelationships among learning organization, organizational learning and knowledge management is an answer for the need of aligning two important concepts of organizational learning and knowledge management within one integrated field, in order to make them more comprehensible and more often applicable in practice (Pun & Nathai-Balkissoon, 2011, pp. 203-2023). The organizational learning and knowledge management concepts are aligned in order to create and sustain a competitive advantage of organization.

The presented framework of interrelationships among knowledge management, organizational learning and learning organization concepts is convergent with the ideas and postulates proposed by many authors. As the field of learning and knowledge in organizations is developing there are several proposals of aligning the analysed concepts, however the majority of them take into consideration only two out of the three concepts. The following discussion introduces a few of them.

The integrating role of the learning organization idea was suggested by Pemberton and Stonehouse (2000) as well as by Rebelo and Gomes (2008, p. 301) - "learning organization is an organization that intentionally develops strategies and structures for maximising productive learning with a view to achieving its goals". Unlike Pemberton and Stonehouse, the former researchers took into consideration that learning should be purpose directed. In the presented framework (Figure 1) the author goes further, indicating that learning and applying knowledge should be directed towards achieving competitive goals.

The relations between organizational learning and knowledge management proposed are similar to those described by Pemberton and Stonehouse (2000). In both cases organizational knowledge assets are the intermediate link between knowledge management and organizational learning. Through organizational learning processes new knowledge assets are generated or hitherto knowledge assets are developed/modified. Subsequently knowledge management affects those assets by formalising and co-ordinating them (new knowledge assets) or storing, distributing and sharing them (old knowledge assets) (Pemberton & Stonehouse, 2000, pp.184-193). However, they don't take into account feedback relations between stored knowledge, as well as, knowledge management practices and



organizational learning. These relations represent the process through which developed knowledge modifies action – an idea of integrated learning, i.e. cognitive and behavioural change (Crossan et al., 1995, p. 351). The need of those feedback relations is pointed out by some researchers. Thanks to knowledge management an organization is able to use knowledge and put it into action. Some even write that organizational learning is a purpose of knowledge management (King, Chunk, & Haney, 2008, p.168), and knowledge management is one of the actions that supports organizational learning (Wang & Ahmed, 2003, pp. 8–17).

In the field of knowledge management research Firestone and McElroy (2004) claim that the second generation of knowledge management is emerging, which is very close to organizational. The first generation of knowledge management concerned mostly capturing, delivering and using knowledge based generally on IT solutions. The second generation of knowledge management concentrates on answering the questions about producing, testing, evaluating and integrating knowledge. This “new knowledge management”, as Firestone and McElroy call it, benefits from the research work of organizational learning, and basing on this, develops practical solutions for business (Firestone, McElroy, 2004, pp. 177–184).

Whereas, Easterby-Smiths and Lyles (2003) claim that organizational learning and knowledge management are complementary. Those concepts are introduced in an organization depending on the current needs of the organization. If an organization is to improve itself in generating new knowledge it should introduce directives that come from organizational learning research. However, if the organization aims at using existent knowledge assets it should apply prescriptions derived from knowledge management literature (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003).

As far as organizational learning and knowledge management are concerned, connections are under investigation in many works and the relations between knowledge management and learning organization are analysed only in a few researches. For instance the empirical research conducted by Karkoulian, Messarra and McCarthy (2013) suggests that knowledge management processes influence the learning organization, but not the contrary. Therefore managers should implement formal and informal knowledge management practices to enable a dynamic learning environment. One can come to the conclusion that knowledge management practices supports organizational learning and constructs learning organization (Karkoulian et al., 2013, pp. 511–526).

CONCLUSIONS

Interrelating three concepts that derive from different research trends and disciplines seems to be important from the theoretical and practical per-



spective. From the theoretical and research point of view there is need for building new theories on the results of all three concepts (looking for synergy). This could lead to a better understanding of each concept, a more complete discovering of regularities and then a more effective application of theory into practice. Better understanding of organizational learning phenomena could enable the designing of better knowledge management systems, which could grasp and disseminate the cognitive learning effects. Moreover, more effective knowledge management could enhance organizational learning. Therefore there is a need for an empirical analysis of the connections between knowledge management practices (formal and informal ones) and organizational learning processes on an individual, group and organizational level as well as relations between those practices and learning results. Additionally there is still a need for identifying practices that provide alignment (fit) between organizational learning, knowledge management and strategic contexts of the organization or how to keep learning on the right path.

In the practical sense integration of those three concepts could result in a renewal of the learning organization concept in the practitioners' eyes. The learning organization firstly met with a positive and enthusiastic reception by managers but finally, because of its problematic applicability, it was abandoned. On the other hand, knowledge management helps managers in organizing knowledge assets but based only on technological, information processing solutions which doesn't give great performance results, as it was firstly expected. Managers start to notice the need of a more organic, social approach to knowledge, which is applied in the proposed understanding of the learning organization.

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KONCEPCJA ORGANIZACJI UCZĄCEJ SIĘ W KONTEKŚCIE ORGANIZACYJNEGO UCZENIA SIĘ I ZARZĄDZANIA WIEDZĄ

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Terminologia dotycząca takich koncepcji jak organizacja ucząca się, organizacyjne uczenie się i zarządzanie wiedzą jest nieuporządkowana. Uważa się, że dwie z nich są niejednoznacznie rozumiane.

Cele badań. A artykule przedstawiono różnice, podobieństwa i związki między koncepcjami organizacji uczącej, organizacyjnego uczenia się i zarządzania wiedzą. Celem artykułu jest zaproponowanie nowego, integrującego spojrzenia na te koncepcje.

Metodyka. Rozważania oparto na analizie literatury przedmiotu i syntezie. Analiza obejmuje porównanie istoty koncepcji organizacji uczącej, organizacyjnego uczenia się i zarządzania wiedzą.

Kluczowe wnioski. Przeprowadzone porównanie wykazało powiązania między trzema koncepcjami. Organizacja ucząca się może obejmować zastosowanie organizacyjnego uczenia się, zarządzania wiedzą oraz koncepcji wiedzy organizacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: organizacyjne uczenie się, organizacja ucząca się, zarządzanie wiedzą, wiedza organizacji

