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### Survey In Impact Of Organizational Learning On Organizational Performance

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#### ABSTRACT

Organizational learning is considered to be one of the most important issues in modern managerial literature. Recently, it has been coupled with the question of organizational performance. The Stakeholder theory addresses organizational performance evaluation from multiple perspectives - shareholders, employees, customers and suppliers of a certain company. This paper focuses on the relationship between organizational learning process (OL) and organizational performance from the employee perspective (Empp). We tested the hypothesis that higher-level organizational learning leads to improved organizational performance from the employee perspective. We used the sample data gathered by a self-administered questionnaire from top management members of 197 Iranian companies with more than 100 employees in June 2013. Two constructs (OL and Empp) were measured using nine measurement variables. Structural equation modelling methodology was employed. The results demonstrate the statistically significant, strong and positive impact of organizational learning on performance from the employee perspective. Companies which invest efforts into the systematic approach to organizational learning profit in terms of an augmented level of employee trust in the leadership, improved efficiency of work organization, a more committed workforce, decreased costs of work per employee, increased employee satisfaction and increased employee flexibility.

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### INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning is considered to be one of the most important issues in modern managerial literature. In our view, it is important to address it in terms of organizational performance from the modern perspective. In this manner, the Stakeholder theory addresses organizational performance evaluation from multiple perspectives. It stresses the interests of shareholders, employees, customers, as well as suppliers of a certain company. This paper concentrates on the relationship between organizational learning process (OL) and organizational performance from employee perspective (Empp) and attempts to evaluate the impact that the former has on the latter.

Organizational learning has emerged as one of the most promising concepts in strategic management since the late 1980s. A leading researcher in the field of organizational learning stated... "the ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage" [7]. This is why we have developed a conceptual model relating organizational learning to one important aspect of organizational performance – that is the employee perspective. In order to do so, we systemized and presented definitions and process of organizational learning. In addition, we have discussed the traditional and modern (Stakeholder theory and Balanced Scorecard) approaches to organizational performance measurement and, in this context, concentrate

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on the estimation of organizational performance from the employee perspective. We provided an empirical test as well.

This paper is divided into four main parts. First, the model is conceptualized by presenting the main constructs and the relationships among them, and formulating the hypotheses and operationalising the constructs of concern. Second, data analysis begins with parameter estimation. In this context the utilized sample is described and the hypotheses are tested. Third, the model fit at the global, structural and measurement level is assessed. Finally, the results are discussed from a modern managerial perspective. We conclude by exposing some limitations to our work and providing directions for future research in the area.

## *2. Towards The Model:*

Constructing a model means examining the existing theoretical basis for constructs of concern and establishing a framework for their operationalization. Empirical foundations for the influence of the exogenous on the endogenous latent variable are examined as well and a hypothesis for further empirical testing is formulated. The two constructs of interest will be organizational learning (OI) and organizational performance from employee perspective (Empp).

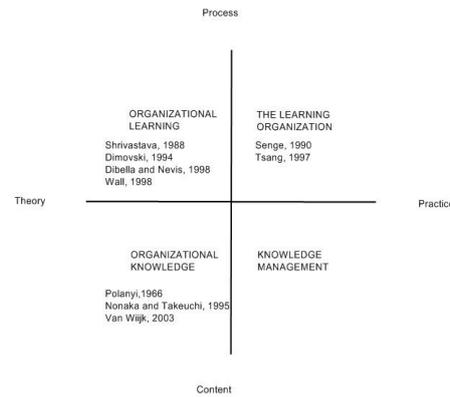
### *2.1. Constructs – organizational learning and organizational performance from the employee perspective:*

Organizational learning (OI) could well be the most ambiguous part of the model due to the absence of common understanding of the concept and the virtual non-existence of a unique definition. This statement can be supported by the findings of Shrivastava [32] and Dimovski [9]. According to the first author, the vast majority of research in the area has been fragmented and is incomplete. The second author adds that the research in the field of organizational learning has resulted in numerous definitions and models [28,37] that can be differentiated through the criteria of inclusiveness, wideness and focusing. Dimovski [9] also states that most of the definitions are only partial, because they deal with organizational learning from one theoretical perspective only.

To present just a few of them – Senge [31] defines organizational learning as ‘a continuous testing of experience and its transformation into knowledge available to whole organization and relevant to their mission’, while Huber [17] sees it as a combination of four processes: information acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation and organizational memory. Argyris and Schön [2] are even less restrictive in their definition declaring that organizational learning emerges when organizations acquire information (knowledge, understandings, know-how, techniques and procedures) of any kind by any means. Jones [18] emphasizes the importance of organizational learning for organizational performance defining it as ‘a process through which managers try to increase organizational members’ capabilities in order to understand better and manage an organization and its environment to accept decisions that increase organizational performance on a continuous basis’.

Dimovski provides an overview of previous research and identifies four various perspectives to organizational learning. His model manages to merge the informational, interpretational, strategic and behavioural approach to organizational learning and defines it as a process of information acquisition, information interpretation and resulting behavioural and cognitive changes, which should in turn have an impact on organizational performance.

Furthermore, the concept of organizational learning is often confused with the concepts of learning organization, knowledge management and/or organizational knowledge. Easterby-Smith and Lyles [12] provide a comprehensive and systematic mapping of the area and differentiate among the four terms using two continuums: theory vs. practice and content vs. process as presented in Figure 1. The distinction between organizational learning and the learning organization is explained to the extent that organizational learning refers to the study of learning processes of, within and between organizations, largely from an academic point of view. On the other hand, the learning organization is considered as an entity – an ideal form of organization, which has the capacity to learn effectively and hence to prosper [35]. Beside the differentiation structure vs. process, the distinction between organizational learning and learning organization can also be seen from another perspective. While organizational learning tends to be positive, descriptive, the idea of learning organization tends to be normative and prescriptive in its nature.



**Fig. 1:** Mapping the area of organizational learning, learning organization, knowledge management and organizational knowledge [12].

An analogous division can be made between the terms organizational knowledge and knowledge management. Many authors [30,28,36] elaborate on the tacitness and explicitness of organizational knowledge, explain the various forms of its conversion through the well known SECI model, and recently, study knowledge networks as a major conduit for knowledge transfer. Those who write about the organizational knowledge often adopt a philosophical slant in trying to understand and conceptualize the nature of knowledge that is contained within organizations [12]. On the other hand, the knowledge management literature frequently adopts a technical approach directed towards disseminating and leveraging knowledge in order to enhance organizational performance. Information-communication technologies are focal to such discussions. The first dichotomy by which we can organize the field is one of theory vs. practice. The second dichotomy is the one that sets apart process from content. While knowledge is a content which the organization may or may not possess, learning is a process which leads towards acquiring knowledge. Or, the focus will be organizational learning. The challenge that remains is how to operationalize such an elusive concept.

How can we evaluate organizational performance from the employee perspective (Empp)? Modern business environment demands multi-goal orientation. Profit theory [6] is no longer a valid measure of organizational performance and neither are the other approaches that take into consideration only the interests of shareholders (owners) of a company. The modern business environment is characterized by increased importance and strength of customers, employees and society in general. Already the behavioural theory of a company (Cyert and March, 1963) has recognized the company as a coalition of individuals or groups of individuals such as management, employees, customers, owners, government etc but has done nothing to introduce this affirmation to organizational performance assessment. Besides financial performance (FP), non-financial performance (NFP) must also be assessed in order to evaluate the overall organizational performance of a modern company. Several approaches to non-financial indicators selection exist, of which the most established is Balanced Scorecard – BSC [20].

It has become quite obvious that, within modern company performance assessment, all stakeholders need to be taken into account. This is the main idea of Freeman's Stakeholder theory. Nevertheless, this paper will concentrate on organizational performance from the employee perspective alone. Within their work on strategic human resource management, Zupan and Kaše [38] and Kaše established a set of measures aimed at measuring the organizational performance from the employee perspective in terms of the results of HRM. Twelve items for the construct Empp were included in the questionnaire and, based on the exploratory factor analysis findings, five were omitted from further analysis with structural equation modelling. Those were the net fluctuation of employees, workforce productivity, trust among employees, the work efforts of employees, absenteeism and risk adversity/inclines.

**Table 1:** Specification of constructs – latent variables, their indicators, number of measurement items and their sources.

Latent variables (constructs)	Measurement variables (indicators) and number of items aggregated into each	Sources
Organizational learning (Ol)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information acquisition (INFOACQ) – 12</li> <li>• Information interpretation (INFOINT)- 11</li> <li>• Behavioural and cognitive changes (BCC) - 14</li> </ul>	Argyris and Schön, 1996. Dimovski, 1994. Huber, 1991. Senge, 1990. Srivastava, 1983.
Organizational performance from employee perspective (Empp)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust into leadership (EMP3) -1</li> <li>• Efficiency of work organization (EMP5) - 1</li> <li>• Employee commitment (EMP6) -1</li> </ul>	Freeman, 1984, 1994: Stakeholder theory. Kaplan and Norton, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1996a: Balanced

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs of work per employee comparatively to industry average (EMP8) - 1</li> <li>• Employee satisfaction with conditions within company (EMP10) -1</li> <li>• Employee flexibility comparatively to competition (EMP11) – 1</li> </ul>	<p>scorecard. Zupan and Kaše, 2003. Kaše, 2004.</p>
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The two constructs (OI and Empp) were measured using the nine measurement variables: information acquisition (INFOACQ), information interpretation (INFOINT) and behavioural and cognitive changes (BCC) for OI and trust into leadership (EMP3), efficiency of work organization (EMP5), employee commitment (EMP6), costs of work per employee compared to the industry average (EMP8), employee satisfaction with conditions within the company (EMP10) and employee flexibility compared to competition (EMP11) to measure latent variable organizational performance from the employee perspective (Empp).

## 2.2. Relationship among constructs:

At this point we need to examine the previous research relating to organizational learning and the indicators used to measure organizational performance from the employee perspective.

In regard to employee commitment, Tannenbaum *et al* [34] and Facticeau *et al* [13] found it to be highly correlated with the motivation to learn. Brooks [4] believes that knowledge-based artefacts point to increased organizational commitment. In their survey among 192 employees of a national service organization in the health care industry, Kontoghiorghes and Bryant [25] demonstrated the importance of learning and how an organization can use it as an action lever when wishing to build a committed, innovative, and competitive workforce. All learning variables investigated in their study were found to be moderately to highly correlated with organization commitment. They believe that in this modern era in which employees act more like free agents, while organizations are in constant flux of downsizing and restructuring, learning can not only assist in the development of a highly trained, knowledgeable and competent workforce, but can also enhance employee commitment and thus serve as a tool of competitive advantage.

Kontoghiorghes and Bryant [25] also believe employee satisfaction is a key contributor to organizational success and survival. In this context, it is important to evaluate the impact that organizational learning has on employee satisfaction. In their study of a major Scottish electronic company, Pate *et al* [29] established that investments in human resource development practices, such as lifelong learning, pay off in terms of more positive psychological contracts (higher employee satisfaction and commitment) and knowledge transfer.

In a sample of 161 Australian construction companies, Love *et al* [26] interestingly revealed that the firm's quality and learning practices did not significantly influence rework costs in projects. However, factors such as project reviews and external benchmarking were significantly correlated with project schedule growth. In their belief, a low to moderate learning capability of sample companies could hinder their ability to implement the best practice and work toward the reduction of rework (and costs of work) in projects.

Dealing with organizational learning and work efficiency, Macher and Mowery [27] demonstrated that human resource and organizational practices, (including 'learning by doing') in both the development and the adoption of new process technologies, improve manufacturing performance by accelerating new product introduction, improving workflow, and enhancing the efficiency of manufacturing processes.

The concept of flexibility is often mentioned as a desirable characteristic of firms and employees. Flexible organizations exhibit an ability to change in response to business environment changes. A firm's ability to demonstrate flexibility depends to a large degree upon the flexibility exhibited by its employees. Anell and Wilson [1] comment that measures taken by Swedish firms in order to stimulate flexibility seemed mainly aimed at the current employed co-workers and at increasing their functional flexibility through lifelong learning and involvement in multi-skilled cross-functional teams. Myers reports on an experiment in a US life insurance company aimed at eliminating bureaucracy. By using a pay-for-learning instrument, they succeeded in stimulating creativity and increasing employee flexibility.

In his work on empowerment, Carr [5] establishes a modern model of leadership which involves setting and aligning employees with the mission of an organization. This facilitates the coordination of organizational activities and communication at all levels, ensures creativity to continuously create new practices, processes, products, and services of value to the organization and its customers. Above all, learning needs to be ensured so that all transactions become opportunities for improvement and trust throughout the organization needs which are to be developed and maintained. Based on previous work in this area and empirical investigation, we formulated the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Better organizational learning leads to better organizational performance from employee perspective.

## 3. Data Analysis:

### 3.1. Sample:

We used the sample data gathered by a self-administered questionnaire from top management members of 197 Iranian companies with more than 100 employees in June 2013. 820 measurement instruments were sent out and 187 received in three week's time which indicates a 24% response rate. Bearing in mind that no second

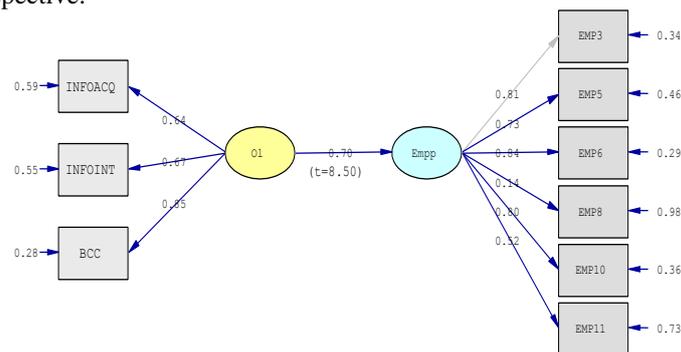
mailing was conducted, based on methodological reasons and knowing that the typical response rate for such a research design in the Iranian context is 18-20%, the questionnaire can be regarded as a success. This implies that after 20 years, organizational learning still presents a very important issue for both practitioners as well as academia.

### 3.2. Parameter Estimation:

The next phase in the process is parameter value estimation using the LISREL (SIMPLIS) tool for structural equation modelling. This is a combination of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and econometric modelling, which aims to analyse hypothesized relationships among latent constructs, measured with observed indicators (measurement variables). The complete SEM model has two parts – structural and measurement sub-model. The important advantage that SEM has over multiple regression is that it allows for simultaneous testing of multiple endogenous (dependent) variables if needed. On the other hand, SEM demands relatively large samples. Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2000) propose at least 200 units as a rule of thumb, even though the required sample size depends largely upon the number of parameters to be estimated.

The maximum likelihood (ML) method was used to estimate parameter values. In this phase, hypotheses formulated in the conceptualization phase are tested. Even though several methods can be used for this purpose, ML is the most often used and has the advantage of being statistically efficient and at the same time specification error sensitive, because it demands only complete data and does not allow for missing values. All methods will, however, lead to similar parameter estimates in circumstance where the sample is large enough and the model is correct [19]. In Figure 2, the path diagram of our model (with completely standardized parameter estimates and corresponding t-values) is presented.

Results are presented in Figure 1 and demonstrate the positive impact of organizational learning on employee performance. This impact is strong and statistically significant. This means that companies which invest efforts into a systematic approach to organizational learning profit in terms of organizational performance from the employee perspective.



**Fig. 2:** Research model (completely standardized parameter values and t-value).

### 3.3. Model fit:

The model fit was assessed at the global level (using seven different fit indices) in order to determine the degree to which the hypothesized model is consistent with the data at hand. In other words, the degree to which the implicit matrix of covariances, (based on the hypothesized model), and the sample covariance matrix, (based on data), fit.

Over the years, numerous global fit indices have been developed. However, none of them is superior to the others. Different authors favour various measures. That is why Diamantopoulos and Siguaw [8] recommend using several measures and at the same time provide reference values for every one of them and are presented in Table 2. The most traditional value is  $\chi^2$  statistics.  $\chi^2$  aims to establish whether the implicit matrix of covariances exactly matches the sample covariance matrix, which is in practice virtually impossible. It is more important to concentrate on other global fit indices in order to determine the degree of model misfit and its acceptability to the researcher. Researchers are usually willing to accept approximately correct models with small misspecifications. Having established that the quantity of misfit is small, we can move on further to the examination of other fit indices.

**Table 2:** Global fit assessment.

Fit indices	Model value	Reference value	Global model fit?
$\chi^2$ (level of significance p)	64,16 (0,00)	$p \geq 0,05$	No
RMSEA	0,0831	< 0,100	Yes (appropriate)
AIC	98,872	< AIC saturated model	No

		<AIC independent model	Yes
CAIC	180,059	<CAIC saturated model <CAIC independent model	Yes
Standardized RMR	0,0557	<0,05	Limit value
GFI	0,935	$\geq 0,90$	Yes
AGFI	0,887	$\geq 0,90$	Limit value
PGFI	0,54	$\geq 0,50$	Yes
NNFI	0,955	$\geq 0,95$	Yes
CFI	0,968	$\geq 0,95$	Yes

Source for reference values: Diamantopoulos and Sigauw, 2000.

Most of the indices lead to the conclusion that the model is an appropriate representation of reality. The root means square error of approximation (RMSEA) is the most widespread measure of global fit and in our case points to the acceptable fitness of the model. Where smaller values represent a better fit, the Akaike information criteria (AIC) and the consistent Akaike information criteria (CAIC) of the model need to be compared against the AIC and the CAIC for the saturated and independent model. That is also the case in our model, with the exception of the AIC of the saturated model. The standardized root mean square residual (Standardized RMR) is a fit index calculated from standardized residuals (differences between elements of sample and implicit covariance matrix). The goodness-of-fit (GFI) index, adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI) index and parsimony goodness-of-fit (PGFI) index are absolute fit indices which directly assess how well the covariance based on parameter estimates reproduces sample covariances. Non-normed fit index (NNFI) also called the Tucker and Lewis' index improves the normed fit index (NFI) by the introduction of degrees of freedom and, together with the comparative fit index (CFI), account for the parsimony of the model. [16]. All of the indices described above lead to the conclusion that our model can be regarded as a close enough approximation of reality.

#### *Discussion Of Results:*

Finding ways to enhance organizational performance (from various aspects) is a crucial question in the modern, turbulent business environment that most companies of today face. In a new, knowledge based economy, where information and knowledge play a vital role, it is extremely important to reinforce systematic efforts to achieve organizational learning at a higher level, which we might name double-loop learning, strategic learning or generative learning.

Our research demonstrated the statistically significant positive and the strong impact of organizational learning on organizational performance from the employee perspective. Companies that manage to develop organizational learning at a higher level will profit in terms of increased employee trust in the leadership, higher perceived efficiency of work organization, a higher degree of employee commitment, lower costs of work per employee in comparison to the industry average, employees more satisfied with the conditions within the company and improved employee flexibility compared to the competition.

The results obtained should have a resounding effect throughout whole modern paradigm of management process. In the planning phase, management needs to consider the goals of employees who are a very important group of shareholders. Our previous research [9] demonstrated that besides ethical and altruistic reasons, very practical and financial ones were also established. From the managerial function of the organizing point of view, one can say that the situational variables of the modern business environment demand organizational structure to be closer to the organic type. Organizations that desire improvement in employees relations through improved organizational learning processes will perform better. Supporting learning, cooperation and the empowerment of employees are the tasks of a modern leader in a learning organization. Modern leaders need to support an organizational culture of cooperation, trust, and information sharing. This might be the place where ICT (e.g. intranet, virtual communities of employees etc.), reward systems and strong leadership can support organizational learning efforts. To be able to execute efficient and effective control in a turbulent environment, characterized by a decentralization of knowledge and constant change, various information systems for control are compulsory to track results that organizational learning conveys.

#### *Conclusion:*

Our aim was to develop a theoretical and empirical framework to test the impact that the organizational learning process has on organizational performance from the employee perspective. Relying on the data from 197 iranian companies with more than 100 employees gathered in June 2013, the hypothesis stating that better organizational learning leads to better organizational performance from employee' perspective was tested.

Companies that put more effort into achieving higher-level organizational learning profit in terms of increased level of employee trust in the leadership, improved efficiency of work organization, a higher level of employee commitment, decreased costs of work per employee (in comparison to the industry average) a more satisfied workforce within the company and augmented employee flexibility. These results are consistent with the previous empirical research [1,4,9,25,26,27].

We have to be aware of some limitations to our research and the arising directions for future research. First, sample size and context always pose important limitation. We used a sample of Iranian companies with more than 100 employees in year 2013. It would be very interesting and useful to introduce the cross-cultural dimension in this context and to cross-validate the model in different settings (e.g. EU– current and accession members, USA, Asian ‘tigers’ etc). Second, a longitudinal study could provide some additional insights into the issue of performance from higher-level organizational learning. Organizational learning might have even a stronger impact with some kind of time lag. Third, we have to be aware of the problems with the operationalization of the organizational learning construct. To measure such a subtle concept certainly poses a big challenge to the research community. Fourth, almost omnipresent in social studies research, is the open question of causality and time-lag among constructs which could be resolved using a longitudinal observation. Fifth, methodology employed offers insight into the breadth of the problem studied, while it does not go into the individual company. Hence, further work calls for in-depth studies on an individual and group basis within a firm. Nevertheless, we hope and believe that this developed and tested model presents a relatively well balanced relationship between the complexity of organizational learning process and organizational performance from the employee perspective in the modern business environment on the one hand, and the simplicity of its formulation in the model on the other. A considerable amount of work is still ahead of us. We hope we have demonstrated the importance of systematic efforts to achieve strategic, generative or double-loop organizational learning for the strategic management of modern company in its on-going efforts to enhance organizational performance.

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