

# Organizational Learning and Human Resource: A Review of the Theory and Literatures

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**Abstract.** Prior reviews of organizational learning have demonstrated that there are conceptual confusions about the definitions and conceptual frameworks. In addition, a small number of available instruments are existed in measuring organizational learning phenomena, which further hampers the development of organizational learning empirical studies. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the similarities and the differences on organizational learning in terms of definitions, core conceptual models and frameworks, available measures, and empirical research. Implications for empirical research future research and practice were discussed at the end of the paper.

**Keywords:** Organizational Learning, Organizational Learning Conceptual Model, Empirical Research.

## 1. Introduction

The construct of organizational learning has been articulated for more than forty years, and scholars have acknowledged that the concept was first mentioned by March and Simons in 1958 (Casey, 2005). The base of organizational learning literature has expanded conceptually, theoretically, and somewhat empirically during the past decades (Dodgson, 1993; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Lipshitz, Popper & Friedman, 2002). With the speed of technological change, advances of globalization, and growing corporate competition, the field of organizational learning has grown rapidly in the 1990s (Dodgson, 1993; Easterby-Smith, Snell, & Gherardi, 1998). The concept of organizational learning has not only attracted the attention of scholars from disparate disciplines but also consultants and managers in the business world (Chiva & Alegre, 2005) because the concept of learning provides insights for firms to respond to uncertain and changing environmental circumstances (Dodgson, 1993). From the resource-based perspective, an organization learns to develop organizational structures and systems to transform itself to become more adaptive and responsive to changes and jolts in the external environment (Meyer, 1982; Dodgson, 1993). Meyer (1982) has argued that such environmental jolts are good opportunities for an organization to learn to deal with crisis. An organization improves performance and readjusts itself to the dynamic environment through the learning process.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definitions of Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a complex and multidimensional construct with various definitions, which cover broad ideas in describing the phenomenon (Crossan, Lane, White, & Djurfeldt, 1995; Tsang, 1997; Easterby-Smith, 1997). Although the term organizational learning and the learning organization are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a separate literature base on each of them (Easterby-Smith, 1997; Tsang, 1997; Sun, 2003). The organizational learning literature has emphasized understanding learning processes in organizational settings with more theoretical and empirically based approaches. Scholars have stressed that it is critical to distinguish between these widely used terms for studying organizational learning and the learning organization.

### 2.2. Cognitive or Behavioral Emphasis

Despite the existing various definitions of organizational learning, the literature usually focuses on changes in cognitive maps or changes in behavior (Casey, 2005; Tsang, 1997). Although the literature has presented diverse organizational learning definitions, these definitions are in agreement with the aspect that organizational learning contains both cognitive and behavioral activities (Lundberg, 1995). The cognitive approach operationalizes learning in terms of the cognitive patterns associated with processing information

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and interpreting events. The behavioral approach operationalizes learning in terms of a routine-based mechanism in repeating or changing behaviors to respond but cognitive elements are not involved in the process. Previous literature has argued and attempted to reconcile the cognitive and behavioral perspective (Crossan, Lane, White, & Djurfeldt, 1995). Since researchers have gradually accepted broad definitions of organizational learning and have recognized that organizational learning is the combination of both cognitive and behavior development, the debate about organizational learning process as being either a cognitive focus or a behavioral focus has gone silent (Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000). However, the debate has provided critical insights in the organizational learning field, such as what is learning and how it differs from constructs like unreflective change and adaptation (Bapuji & Crossan, 2004).

Argyris (1977) was the first scholar who proposed that learning involves actions and changes in cognition and behaviors, and it can be divided into: single-loop learning and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is similar to Fiol and Lyles' (1985) lower-level learning, which focuses on the incremental organizational adaptation and behavioral-level learning. The action and learning feedback in single-loop learning is passive and adaptive. Single-loop learning and lower-level learning are similar to one of Shrivastava's (1983) organizational learning core ideas, organizational learning as adaptation.

### **2.3. Units of Analysis**

Another current debate in the organizational learning literature has been the consensus about the appropriate levels or units of organizational learning (Crossan, Lane, White, & Djurfeldt, 1995; Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000). Organizational learning research has theoretically pointed out that individual-level learning should be embedded and transferred into organizational-level learning, such as Huber's (1991) organizational memory, Kim's (1993) shared mental model of integrating individual learning to organizational learning, and Crossan, Lane, and White's organizational-level institutionalizing in the 4I organizational learning model.

In general, based on the assumptions about the level(s) of learning, organizational learning can be classified into individual, group, organizational, and interorganizational-levels (Crossan, Lane, White, & Djurfeldt, 1995). Researchers have defined different organizational learning definitions based on the various levels. Most researchers have paid attention to how individuals learn in an organization (Casey, 2005).

### **2.4. Core Organizational Learning Models**

Researchers have described and developed various types of organizational learning models based on different perspectives and theoretical foundations of learning. This subsection synthesizes current core organizational learning models in chronological order to provide a holistic understanding of key models used in the organizational learning literature.

To investigate the evolution of organizational learning models, it is important to recognize the contributions of early organizational learning scholars, who viewed an organization as an interpretation system of its environment. In other words, organizational learning is similar to the individual's information learning process. Daft and Weick (1984) argued that organizations, as open systems, rely on the interpretations formulated by individuals, especially the top managers.

In addition, Daft and Huber (1987) proposed two perspectives, the systems-structural and interpretive perspectives, to explain how organizations learn about their environments. The systems-structural perspective emphasizes information acquisition and information distribution, and views them as resources for an organization to learn about its both internal and external environment.

In 1991, Huber was the first scholar that proposed the organizational learning process model. In addition, Huber's (1991) organizational learning process model has been adopted often, revised, or extended as a foundation in describing the organizational learning process. It contains four major organizational learning constructs: knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organizational memory, which view organizational learning as an effective process of acquiring, distributing, and interpreting information from the internal and external environment.

Later, Dibella, Nevis, and Gould (1996) also adopted Huber's (1991) organizational learning process as the theoretical base to develop a three-stage organizational learning framework, including knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, and knowledge utilization. Dibella, Nevis, and Gould (1996) assumed that organizational learning is a social system and process that organization members learn, create, share, and transfer knowledge within the organization.

## 2.5. Empirical Studies on Organizational Learning and Human Resource

Bapuji and Crossan (2004) have indicated that there has been exponential growth in the organizational learning literature through the 1990s. Despite the growing popularity of the term, organizational learning, most literature has been focused conceptually and there has been relatively limited empirical research. Scholars in the organizational learning field have acknowledged the limited empirical research in examining organizational learning conceptual frameworks and models (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Huber, 1991; Tsang, 1997; Dyck, Starke, Mischke, & Mauws, 2005). Most researchers have focused on the theoretical side of explaining organizational learning (Saru, 2005).

Moreover, the organizational learning literature has provided human resource management researchers with knowledge in understanding information processing and knowledge creation. Without individual's efforts in learning towards the new information and knowledge, an organization would have difficulty to achieve and initiate the organizational learning mechanism. Hence, there is a need to explore individual-level innovation performance while investigating the relationship between organizational learning and innovation performance.

Learning has been acknowledged as a key process that contributes to successful innovation, which determines and supports an organization's success (Casey, 2005; Verdonschot, 2005). In the workplace learning literature, organizational learning, a kind of knowledge-based resource capability, has become more important in the rapidly changing technology and fiercely competitive business world (Carrillo & Gaimon, 2004).

Human resource is a field of study and practice that is concerned with optimizing learning and development and performance improvement at the individual, group, team, and organization levels. Although predominant paradigms in human resource have included learning and performance, scholars have more recently acknowledged that both paradigms are not mutually exclusive and need to be integrated positively to impact organizational systems (Swanson & Holton III, 2001). The concept of organizational learning is most closely associated with human resource's learning paradigm, which stresses that organizations are systems that support multiple levels of learning. Developing and promoting an organization's learning capability is one approach that enables an organization to keep pace with the changing environment (Swanson & Holton III, 2001). Saru (2005) has acknowledged that organizational-level learning and development can be facilitated under a clear linkage between corporate strategy and human resource practices. In other words, organizational learning must be coherent with an organization's design, strategy, structure, and strategic human resource practices and context.

## 3. Discussion and Conclusion

The review of the organizational learning literature has presented the various perspectives of definitions, core processes, models, and limited empirical research on organizational learning. First, the review of organizational learning definitions clarifies two critical issues in the organizational learning literature: cognitive or behavioral emphasis, and the level or units of organizational learning analysis. This review does not attempt to reconcile the variances in views regarding the cognition or behavioral development emphasis and units of analysis. The purpose of this review is to present some researchers' perspectives of about the importance of cognitive and behavioral assumptions on learning and individual-level learning to achieve organizational-level learning. The researcher proceeded to review organizational learning core models and has recognized there is more than a single model or framework in articulating organizational learning. With the diverse disciplines, the organizational learning literature presents multiple facets of how organizational learning occurs and its processes.

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