Chapter 10
Factors Affecting Knowledge Acquisition

ABSTRACT

Although there is a growing literature on knowledge management, limited attention has been paid to the factors that influence the process of knowledge acquisition. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to bring forward the main elements that may stimulate or inhibit knowledge acquisition at both the individual and organizational level. Knowledge acquisition is mainly affected by a company’s absorptive capacity, organizational context and structure, and inter-firm alliances. These may increase the firm’s awareness of the external challenges and stimulate inter-organizational interactions. The impact of each of these factors is highly visible in the context of international joint ventures. Still, in this case, another factor interferes, namely cultural specificity.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management makes available the right knowledge to the right people at the right time to deal with complex and ever-changing organizational environment (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2010; Bennet, D. & Bennet, A., 2003; Dalkir, 2005; Jashapara, 2011; O’Dell & Hubert, 2011). Therefore, it relies on a series of complex processes such as: knowledge acquisition, creation, sharing and use. Each of them captured researchers’ attention and has been analyzed in the specialized literature. I have already addressed some of these issues in the previous chapters.

Although there is a growing literature on knowledge management and the framework of analysis varies from individual (Siemsen, Roth & Balasubramanian, 2008) to organizational (Bettiol, Di Maria & Grandinetti, 2012; Merat & Bo, 2013; Nonaka, von Krogh & Voelpel, 2006) and national level (Gallego, Rubalcaba & Suarez, 2013; Stähle & Bounfour, 2008), and from highlighting the effects of using knowledge management processes, methods and techniques (Bouncken & Kraus, 2013; Stanko & Olleros, 2013) to measuring organization’s intellectual capital (Lu, Wang, Tung & Liu, 2010; Tovstiga & Tulugurova, 2009), limited attention has been paid to the influence factors of knowledge acquisition. It is true that knowledge is dynamic and it circulates inside and outside company’s boundaries, but in order for these activities to be efficient, some
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specific elements must be taken into account. Things don’t just happen; the law of action and reaction is even more important in the business environment, where the global economies are interconnected, and the suppliers, manufacturers and customers depend on one another. A change that occurs in one domain of activity is transmitted to the other ones like a shock wave. Therefore, managers must be aware that some internal and external factors may stimulate or inhibit knowledge acquisition, creation, sharing and use. Not taking into consideration these issues reduces organizational performance, firm’s capacity of innovation and company’s position on the market (Ahmad, Mohamad & Ibrahim, 2013; Arbussa & Coenders, 2007; Lichtenthaler, 2009).

As a consequence, in this chapter, I will bring forward the main elements that may stimulate or inhibit knowledge acquisition at both individual and organizational level. I will discuss the impact of absorptive capacity, organizational context and structure (mission, vision and goals, trust, formal and informal organizational structures), and inter-firm alliances (learner’s intention and capacity, relational capital, ties strength and trust). I will also focus on the factors that interfere on the process of knowledge acquisition from inside the international joint-ventures.

ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

Understanding the Concept of Absorptive Capacity

The concept of absorptive capacity was coined by Cohen & Levinthal (1990) who defined it as a capability to value, assimilate and apply knowledge from external sources. The focus was on the individual and the whole process is perceived as being rational. It practically assumes that he or she decides rationally which theories, skills, emotions and values should acquire when interacting with the elements from the external environment. But not all the decisions are rational, especially if we take into account the emotional and spiritual knowledge (Bratianu, 2013; Bratianu & Orzea, 2013). When a person is involved in an intensive emotionally situation, he or she cannot rationally decide to assimilate only the positive feelings that are circulating in that specific framework. Involuntarily, based on previous experiences and knowledge, will associate the current events and issues with positive or negative feelings. The choice will be irrational and based on individual’s background.

Besides, according to Cohen & Levinthal (1990) point of view, the individual is the only one capable of analyzing the environment, identifying, capturing, assimilating, and using knowledge. But the same activities occur in the organizational environment. Whenever a firm has to establish the future business strategy or to elect the most efficient manner of adapting to market demand, it analyzes the micro- and macro-environment, it identifies and captures the critical knowledge, and then it develops the necessary structures and systems for using the acquired knowledge. These aspects have been noted by Tu, Vonderembse, Ragu-Nathan and Sharkey (2006) who argued that the absorptive capacity is an organizational mechanism that supports the processes of identifying, communicating, and assimilating the relevant external and internal knowledge.

The switch from individual to organizational level brings forward a major change of perspective. Firstly, the absorptive capacity is no longer a capability but a mechanism; the approach is no longer static (focusing on something that may be owned), but dynamic (concentrating on something that may be developed and improved). It does not involve just an attribute, a quality that a person may or may not posses; it involves a process, a series of stages and phases that a firm may or may not develop. Secondly, the sources used for capturing and assimilating knowledge are not exclusively