Chapter 9

Power Implications Within Competitive Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The power of a competitive organization is often very clear: one organization is able to impose its will upon another, dominate a competitive arena, or otherwise succeed in a contested environment. However, the implications of power within such competitive organization are tenuous: the concept organization power remains ambiguous, resists quantification, and continues a longstanding lack of research attention, particularly in a dynamic context. Building upon recent work to develop a system for visualizing and measuring dynamic knowledge in the organization, the research described in this chapter addresses the power within organizations. It also identifies important linkages between organization knowledge and power, providing a novel focus on how power is wielded and perceived in the competitive organization. This elucidates how the effects of organization power on knowledge, action and performance can be measured empirically. The use and utility of this approach are illustrated through two measurement examples, both in overtly competitive contexts. The research makes a theoretic contribution by advancing a coherent approach to dynamic knowledge measurement and by extending the understanding of organization power. It makes a practical contribution also through the organization illustrations. As such, it is likely to stimulate considerable thinking, discussion, debate, and continued research.

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INTRODUCTION

The power of a competitive organization is often very clear: one organization is able to impose its will upon another (e.g., via military conflict, court injunction), dominate a competitive arena (e.g., online retail, internet search), or otherwise succeed in a contested environment (e.g., see van Creveld, 1985; Duhigg, 2019; Nissen, Gallup, Shigley & Tanner, 2019). Aside from the internal organization hierarchy, however, the implications of power within such organization are frequently more tenuous: The concept of organization power remains ambiguous, suffering from a plethora of theoretic perspectives (Jasperson, Carte, Saunders, Butler, Croes & Zheng, 2002), plus it resists quantification and continues a longstanding lack of research attention (Maas, 1979). This applies in particular to the dynamics of power within a chosen organization design, which require additional theoretic development (Blackler, 2011; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Marabelli & Galliers, 2017).

Building upon recent work to develop a system for visualizing and measuring dynamic knowledge in the organization (Nissen, 2017; Gallup, Nissen & Iatrou, 2019), the research described in this chapter addresses the power within organizations. This capability is developed judiciously and analogically from an understanding of dynamic physical systems, as well-understood Knowledge Flow Theory (KFT; see Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996; Preiss, 1999; Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Nonaka, 1994; Nissen, 2006b) and Measurement Theory (Krantz et al., 1971) are leveraged for conceptualization and specification of a small set of constructs and relationships that enable measurement. Two particularly important constructs are knowledge energy and knowledge power, which can be measured, interrelated and compared across different kinds of knowledge (e.g., tacit, explicit, individual, group, created, applied), a diversity of organizations (e.g., business, military, non-profit), and even a variety of organization processes and technologic implementations.

The research then builds upon recent work to integrate key aspects of the organization power literature, focusing in particular on power within the organization, and identifying important linkages between organization knowledge and power (Nissen et al., 2019). This enables one to interrelate more closely the dynamics of knowledge with organization power, to focus on how power is wielded and perceived in the competitive organization, and to measure the effects of organization power on knowledge, action and performance.

The use and utility of this approach are illustrated through two measurement examples, both in overtly competitive contexts. The research makes a theoretic contribution by advancing a coherent approach to dynamic knowledge measurement and by extending the understanding of organization power. It makes a practical contribution also through the organization illustrations.

BACKGROUND

Although a relatively wide metaphoric net is cast in terms of reviewing the knowledge and organization literatures, building heavily upon Nissen and colleagues (2019), here the focus is on summarizing linkages between organization knowledge, power and performance. Such focus enables a streamlined background discussion and highlights prior research that is leveraged most directly through the present effort to quantify dynamic knowledge and power. Key findings from this prior research are summarized in Table 1. The interested reader is directed to Nissen and colleagues (2019) for details.
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