Chapter II
Exploring Intellectual Capital Concept in Strategic Management Research

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ABSTRACT
This chapter analyses the concept of intellectual capital in strategic management research. It offers a comprehensive view of the key pillar concepts formulated, in the last twenty years, in the strategic management literature grounding intellectual capital (IC) construct and related components. In the last years, IC has emerged as a key concept for the identification and assessment of company’s intangible assets and knowledge resources. In this chapter it is argued that IC is an umbrella concept for understanding and integrating four fundamental categories of firm’s resources: human capital, social capital, structural capital, and stakeholder capital. The authors believe that a clear understanding of the IC concept provides benefits for both theoretical and practical purposes. In order to develop a theory and/or theoretical implications about the role and the relevance of IC, it is necessary a clear understanding of the concept, which represents the fundamental unit and share of analysis.

INTRODUCTION
In the last several decades the emphasis on knowledge resources, on organisational competencies and, more generally, on firm-specific factors, has strongly contributed in creating a wide acknowledgement of the strategic role of intangible resources for a firm’s success. A number of theoretical and practical contributions, outlining the centrality of knowledge and intangible resources for firm’s performance improvement, have been produced.

Analysing the strategic literature it arises that a lot of terms, frequently interchangeable, with
The ambiguity of the formulated conceptualisations of IC and its components has been encouraged by practitioners’ attention (see e.g., Edvinsson & Sullivan, 1996; Sveiby, 1997). This has involved that, although researchers and practitioners are nowadays using the same concept (i.e., IC), they have different views and interpretations due to their diverse background and experience. In other words, it is missing a common platform for analysing IC. This is a shortcoming for research as well as for practice. In fact, in order to develop a theory and/or theoretical implications about the role and the relevance of IC, it is necessary to ground the studies on a clear understanding of the concept, which represents the fundamental unit and share of analysis.

The clarification of the IC concept is useful not only for theoretical reasons, but mostly because a better understanding of the roots, components and nature of IC is at the basis of management actions. Managers perceive competitive context and define their actions also on the base of their mental models, schemes, beliefs and points of view about the internal and external firm’s success factors. The way to conceive intangible resources or capital especially affects the way by which managers develop and deploy this kind of resource in defining and performing the firm’s strategy.

In particular, focusing on the concepts introduced over the last years in strategic management studies it is possible to incur a number of alternative and overlapping conceptual constructs, such as invisible assets (Itami, 1987), intangible assets (see e.g., Hall, 1992, 1993), intangible elements (see e.g., Carmeli & Tishler, 2004), knowledge assets (see e.g., Spender & Grant, 1996; Teece, 1998; Winter, 1987), and knowledge-based resources (see e.g., Wiklund & Shewert, 2003), as well as social capital (see e.g., Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Nahapet & Goshal, 1998; Yli-Renko, 2001), human capital (see e.g., Hitt et al., 2001), and so on.

More recently on the basis of such numerous and relevant interpretations and in an attempt to synthesise them into a more holistic and manageable construct, the concept of intellectual capital (IC) has been introduced and developed as a new interpretative category of such resources. It can be considered as a conceptualisation that better answers to the managers’ need to have an operative notion of the firm’s cognitive and intangible resources.

In particular, whereas constructs such as human capital or social capital focus on specific features concerned with a firm’s intangible dimension (i.e., respectively, human and relational features), IC appears as an umbrella concept embracing the whole features and dimensions of intangible resources.

Furthermore, it allows one to group and represent the overall intangible assets that are not included in the traditional balance sheets, as well as allows one to assess the differences between the market value and book value of today’s knowledge intensive firms. However, over the last years, the economic and management literature concerning IC has introduced different and often not shared definitions and characterisations.

The chapter begins by reviewing some of the most relevant concepts coined and analysed during the last decades in the strategic management literature and concerning firms’ cognitive and intangible resources. In particular, the review has been performed by analysing the contributions that appeared in strategic management journals published in the last twenty years. Then, taking into account the main insights that emerged from
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