

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Implications for
practitioners

Learning organizations and value creation

379

Simon Reese

University of Maryland Global Campus, Adelphi, Maryland, USA

Received 7 May 2020
Accepted 7 May 2020

I write this implications for practitioners' article in the eighth week of a quarantine lockdown. The impact of the current COVID-19 crisis leaves me, and probably others, wondering how, either temporarily or permanently, organizational learning will evolve. Learning dynamics are certainly different from just three months ago. That is across all levels of individuals, teams and organizations too. Anyone who has attempted to facilitate a workshop via any of the many online platforms can attest to the difficulties in creating a dynamic team-learning environment. With the change in social dynamics, we are all learning how to best work and learn together while being apart. These new social norms will certainly impact organizations and the learning subtleties within organizations over either the short or long term.

Some companies have been quicker to embrace this new "way of working." Others have been less successful with the transition. No matter where your organization or personal situation places you on the continuum between either flourishing in the new social distancing and organizational norm or absolutely hating or incapable of working apart, this special issue of *The Learning Organization* can provide you with some consolation.

The articles of this special issue do not directly link to the situation we confront today. No one could have been that quick to turn around a special issue in the few months since COVID-19 struck. However, what the articles do offer are descriptions of how learning organization concepts relate to elements of value creation processes in a system environment. And, during the time where value is eroding quickly from businesses across the globe, any steps to preserve value in the long term should be cherished. The articles within this issue help managers think about some focal points in the creation of value through learning organization elements at a strategic level. As a practitioner, at this moment, thinking deeply about how you can preserve the elements of your learning organization as you change your working structures may prove essential in retaining value for the short and possibly long term. This issue may help you uncover some critically important learning capacities to preserve during these trying times.

The issue begins with a guest editorial by Nataša Rupčić (Rupčić, 2020). In the article, she describes the evolution of learning organizations and value creation. She begins with a brief evaluation of value creation and the competitive advantage resulting from learning organization elements. She then describes how, regardless of the business orientation approach (strategic, entrepreneurial and cost), a reliance exists on the process of learning. And, that generally, the relationship between learning in any business orientation and performance is positive. From this introduction, where she links traditional views of learning and value creation, Rupčić transitions to the current challenge of determining learning organization value in a complex ecosystem connecting various stakeholders to



The Learning Organization
Vol. 27 No. 4, 2020
pp. 379-382
© Emerald Publishing Limited
0969-6474
DOI 10.1108/TLO-05-2020-255

simultaneously hold symbiotic and independent value propositions. She points toward emergent value co-creation instead of linear development as a challenge of the new models and points to a supply chain ecosystem composed of inter-organizational partnerships. In these complex relationships with both cooperation and competition, value emerges spontaneously from collaborative cultures across organizational boundaries. This is the essential component of the prelude to the special issue. The idea that in an ever-changing business context and orientation, approaches require continued answers to existing questions or as she states:

The purpose of this themed issue is therefore to increase the awareness about the importance of learning organizations and organizational learning by answering the following question: How does the learning organization concept and its constituents relate to elements of the value creation process from the systems perspective? (Rupčić, 2020, pp. 277-289)

Mastio *et al.* (2020) in their article “The learning organization as a context for value co-creation,” provide an integrated framework of a theory-in-use explanation of multi-level value co-creation. In the article, the authors trace the development of the relationship between a learning organization and sustainable value co-creation. To illustrate the progression, the authors use a case study approach of an innovative Australian “green” building products manufacturer and analyze at the macro, meso and micro level of value co-creation. They aim to address “whether the concept of the learning organization has relevance with respect to sustainable value co-creation in turbulent operational contexts” (Mastio *et al.*, 2020, pp. 291-303). This seems like an important topic for today.

Throughout the article, the authors recount how GreenCo evolved in a way that differentiated the business from the market. Engagement outside the organization and learning structure is enlightening for practitioners and essential to remember in the current times. The ability of GreenCo to create social capital inside both the organization and the porous organizational boundaries that propagated the exchange proved of critical importance to the evolution. All of this is important to remember while organizations transition to remote work environments where there is longer separation from the teams (both internal and external). The authors nicely divide the discussion across macro, meso and micro-levels. And, in doing so, offer methods for practitioners to apply in any environment. The article concludes with a reference to a framework for modeling organizational learning and value creation processes. These four core capabilities provide focal points for managers to consider as they work remotely from the organization.

Keeping with the idea of knowledge across the organizational boundary, Kiisk and Rungi (2020) in “Knowledge cannibalism in the European ICT sector” attempt to determine how companies should best generate knowledge. Should the company use internal knowledge or obtain knowledge externally? This is a pressing question in the current environment. When funds are limited and revenues are strained, does the company make or buy?

The authors aim to identify the best knowledge generation strategy in the context of a longitudinal study of information and communication technology companies in Europe. The essential questions place M&A against R&D and patenting. The results surprisingly indicate that the approaches of R&D (internal knowledge creation) and M&A (external knowledge acquisition) were not supportive of each other and, even worse, they can cannibalize one another. And, the fact that the two knowledge generation approaches were very distinctly different and created negative impacts lead toward an important point. Have an organization level approach to knowledge generation and do not dither about your choice. During financially stressful times, organizations may sway toward M&A. But, if your organization has a strong R&D knowledge generation approach, understand what an

M&A may (or may not) accomplish. As [Kiisk and Rungi \(2020\)](#) demonstrate, “internal and external knowledge development strategies are not complementary, signifying a deliberate and difficult choice that companies must make regarding their knowledge path” (pp. 305-319).

[Lenart-Gansiniec and Sulkowski \(2020\)](#) expand the creation of organizational learning and value beyond the organization and into the realm of crowdsourcing in their article, “Organizational learning and value creation in local governance: the mediating role of crowdsourcing.” The authors explore the mediating role of crowdsourcing with organizational learning and value creation and within the context of local governance units in Poland. The authors view how citizens are moved from users to co-creators within the organization and thereby highlight the needs and preferences of the users (or citizens). This presents a novel approach in any organizational context. The idea that the crowd, be it, customers, employees or suppliers, can self-define the needs and preferences of the group helps facilitate learning across the organizations.

The authors examined 205 local governance units in Poland. The findings were not supportive of the hypothesis that crowdsourcing would mediate the relationship between organizational learning and value creation. In the context of local governance, it was also found that organizational learning is not related to value creation. However, the authors did find that crowdsourcing was supportive of organizational learning. So, for practitioners, the impact of crowdsourcing on the organization is supportive, at least in the context of this study. And, this points to a theme from the [Mastio et al. \(2020\)](#) article. As your work environment may be afflicted with changes in social distancing or remote working, retain close ties to those outside the organization.

The theme of socialization is carried forward into the article by [Srirama et al. \(2020\)](#), “Dimensions of social capital and learning culture: A case of an IT organization.” In the article, the authors conduct survey-based research using the dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire and dimensions of social capital. The aim of the study was to uncover whether social capital enables a learning culture. The authors explore three elements of social capital: structural, cognitive and relational.

The authors found a positive effect of social capital on learning culture. And, in their conclusion, they outline how each of the elements ties into earlier research. For practitioners, the points of the study are illuminating. How do you retain social capital in the form of structure, cognition and relationships while overseeing an organization that is separated by space? Putting in place actions to retain social capital can be a first step in retaining a learning culture.

[Sumanarathna et al. \(2020\)](#) carry forward the theme of social capital in “Social Capital, Exploratory Learning and Exploitative Learning in project-based firms: The mediating effect of collaborative environment.” The authors explore the same social capital elements as [Srirama et al. \(2020\)](#): structural, relational and cognitive. However, they conceptualize the elements by viewing network ties, trust and shared narratives. Then they use radical and incremental innovation as methods to dissect the exploratory and exploitative learning elements of ambidextrous organizations. The authors then overlay a collaborative environment as the mediator in their Figure 1.

The model provides a useful illustration of where leaders should focus. Are you maintaining a collaborative environment as your work shifts to a remote setting? Is your collaborative environment voluntary and harboring trust, ties and shared narratives?

To provide a view of organizational learning in a higher education context, [Asiedu et al. \(2020\)](#) in “Factors influencing innovation performance in higher education institutions” explore the relationship of transformational leadership, knowledge management capabilities, organizational learning and innovation performance. The authors use a survey research design to explore the dimensions in five private and two public universities in Ghana. Through the

survey of 219 respondents, the authors find a positive relationship of transformational leadership with knowledge management capabilities and learning organizations. They also find that the relationship results in a positive innovation performance.

It is this awareness of the importance of transformational leadership that may point to what is needed most in these challenging times. The ability of the leader transforms both their self-interests and those of their followers in a way that places them on a path above that which is to be expected. The ability to lead the organization toward improved knowledge management capabilities and learning when the common protocols are removed or placed at a social distance. It is the importance of transformational leading that [Asiedu et al. \(2020\)](#) find, which promotes innovative performance that is created by the coordinating mechanisms of knowledge management and organizational learning. It is transformational leadership that pulls everything together and aligns it all toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

The concepts of learning and value creation are always pertinent. But, these articles in this issue of *The Learning Organization* journal are timely for the environment that we sit in today. Many highlight the importance of retaining social capital and collaborative environments. Others highlight the importance of staying in-tune with those outside the organization. And, yet others explain the importance of maintaining the course. Ultimately, whether society is working differently and socially distancing more or returning to the pre-COVID-19 norm, the practitioner, the leader, the manager and the employee need to remember that learning is an individual, team and organizational level event. We must all think a little harder now about how we work and learn together while being apart.

References

- Asiedu, M., Anyigba, H., Ofori, K., Ampong, G. and Addae, J. (2020), "Factors influencing innovation performance in higher education institutions", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 365-378.
- Kiisk, V. and Rungi, M. (2020), "Knowledge cannibalism in the European ICT sector", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 305-319.
- Lenart-Gansiniec, R. and Sulkowski, L. (2020), "Organizational learning and value creation in local governance: the mediating role of crowdsourcing", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 321-325.
- Mastio, E., Chew, E. and Dovey, K. (2020), "The learning organization as a context for value creation", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 291-303.
- Rupčić, N. (2020), "Guest editorial; learning organizations and the value creation process: Have we answered all the questions?", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 277-289.
- Srirama, M.V., Iyer, P. and Reddy, H. (2020), "Dimensions of social capital and learning culture: a case of an IT organization", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 337-349.
- Sumanarathna, N., Duodu, B. and Rowlinson, S. (2020), "Social capital, exploratory learning and exploitative learning in project-based firms: the mediating effect of collaborative environment", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 351-364.

Corresponding author

Simon Reese can be contacted at: srreese@gwu.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com