CONCEPTUALIZING THE IMPACT OF CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATION FACTORS ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This conceptual paper focuses on organization learning and its antecedents. The paper is written to highlight the development of organizational learning as a field of study, its historical background, as well visualizing the future potential research of organizational learning. Organizational development is often depending on organization's capabilities to adapt with rapid process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge which often called organizational learning. To identify the factors contributing towards organizational learning this paper focuses on several contextual communication factors, namely, communication climate, information communication technology, leadership, networking. These factors are believed to have a significant impact on developing a conducive organizational learning. Numerous reviewed literature and previous research are highlighted to showcase each factor's impact on organizational learning.

As the outcome of the study, this paper raised the potential of organizational learning influence on job performance within the working environment. Based on these assumptions, the hypotheses are formulated and conceptual framework is developed and proposed. As the future recommendations, this paper suggest a particular research method to be used in fulfilling the objectives, testing the hypotheses, and validating the proposed model.

Keywords: *Organizational Learning, Communication Climate, Information Communication Technology, Leadership, Networking.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the current era of competitive business environment, every single organization is required to enhance their competitive edge by at least maintaining their ability to develop. Organizational development is often depending on organization's capabilities to adapt with rapid process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge which often called organizational learning. Organizational learning is a process improvement that can increase efficiency, accuracy, and profits within the organization. Organizational learning specifically applies to the attributes and behavior of this knowledge and how it can produce changes in the cognition, routines, and behaviors of an organization and its members.

The concept of learning organization is important for both organizational development and human resources development. It is initiated for effectively dealing with the challenge of changing working environment and for consistently enabling organization to respond to people's needs. The knowledge of modern technology, environment, and complexity of business competition enables organization to reform its operation and to increase its competitiveness in a sustainable way which, eventually, modernizes the organization to cope with changing environment (Sungkhawan, 2008).

Members of an organization are predominantly seen as the functional mechanisms for organizational learning by creating knowledge through experience. However, individuals' knowledge only facilitates learning within the organization as a whole if it is transferred. Knowledge that is embedded into the organization, in addition to its members, can be retained. Organizations can retain knowledge in many ways other than retaining the individuals, including using knowledge repositories such as communication tools, processes, routines, networks, and transactive information system (Argote & Ingram, 2000) which mainly depending on communication technology.

1.2 Problem Statement

Current research trend on organizational learning is the importance of the context in which learning occurs (Argote, 2011). Many studies show that organizational learning is affected by whether the organization has learning or performing orientation (Bunderson & Sutcliff,

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2003), whether organizational members perceive that they are psychologically safe (Edmondson, 1999), whether members share a subordinate identity (Kane et al., 2005), and power relationships within the organization (Contu & Willmott, 2003). Thus, the context moderates the relationship between experience and learning processes and outcomes.

Although debate has occurred about whether organizational learning should be defined as a change in cognition or a change in behavior, current researchers acknowledge that learning can manifest itself in changes in beliefs/cognitions or actions/behavior (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). Thus, most researchers would agree with defining organizational learning as a change in the organization's knowledge that occurs as a function of experience (Argote, 2011). The knowledge can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including changes in cognitions, routines and behaviors.

The field of organizational learning in the literature contains very limited research on its implementation and practice. Organizational learning research is often related to the studies of organizational theory, organizational communication, organizational behavior, organizational psychology, and organizational development. Organizational learning has received contributions from other fields such as educational psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, and management science. Despite is extensive literature, this current research aims at strengthening the empirical proves which showcase the role of contextual communication factors in forming sought after organizational learning.

1.3 Current Research Objectives

Considering the problem statement discussed above, this paper proposes several important objectives seek to be fulfilled in future research. The main objective of the research should seek to investigate the impact of contextual communication factors on organizational learning. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Validate the impact of organizational communication climate on organizational learning;
2. Validate the impact of information communication technology on organizational learning;
3. Validate the impact of leadership on organizational learning;
4. Validate the impact of networking on organizational learning; and

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5.   Find out the relationship between organizational learning and job performance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Organizational Learning

Any kind of organizations is encountering problems and competitions due to rapid and severe changing circumstances of today's business environment. Organizations need to adjust themselves and find the most appropriate development methods for surviving in this fast changing era. Hence, the ability to adapt and to adjust toward these changes plays an important role in determining organization's survival. To do so, every organization needs the upmost ability to learn about its business environment and its changes. This ability often called organizational learning.

Organizational learning is the process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization. An organization improves over time as it gains experience, and from this experience, an organization is able to create knowledge. Knowledge in an organization includes ways to increase production efficiency or to develop beneficial investor relations. Knowledge is created at four different units, namely, individual, group, organizational, and inter organizational.

Learning organizations are organizations that actively work to optimize retaining knowledge. Learning organizations use the active process of knowledge management to design organizational processes and systems that concretely facilitate knowledge creation, transfer, and retention. The most common way to measure organizational learning is the learning curve. Learning curves are a relationship showing how as an organization produces more of a product or service, it increases its productivity, efficiency, reliability and quality of production with diminishing returns. Learning curves vary due to organizational learning rates which are affected by individual proficiency, improvements in an organization's technology, and improvements in the structures, routines and methods of coordination.

Organizational learning can be conceived as having three sub-processes: creating, retaining and transferring knowledge. When organizations learn from experience, new knowledge is created in the organization. The knowledge can be then retained so that it exhibits some persistence over time. Knowledge can also be transferred within and between

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units. Through knowledge transfer, one unit is affected by the experience of another or learns vicariously from the experience of other units (Argote, 2011). Concerning these factors, the current research, therefore, aims at identifying the direct impact of contextual factors, namely, communication climate, information communication technology, leadership, and networking. These factors represent crucial communication contextual aspects within every organization, and thus, will be elaborated respectively.

2.2 Communication Climate

Learning organizations also address organizational climate in creating a supportive learning environment and practicing working environment that reinforces learning. Creating a supportive learning environment and reinforcing learning depends on the working environment of the organization and the culture it promotes. Organization can create learning opportunities by facilitating environments that include learning activities, establishing a culture of learning via norms, behaviors, and rules, and lead processes of discourse by listening, asking questions, and providing feedback. Organization must provide its members a learning platform by remaining open to new perspectives, being aware of personal biases, seeking exposure to unfiltered and contradictory sources of information, and developing a sense of humility. This set of communication climate will create an efficient learning organizational culture.

Thongpan (2008) proposed that learning culture affected learning organization. To be a successful learning organization, it is necessary to transform the organizational culture which facilitates information share among members of the organization. Shared benefit gained from harmonious cooperation and development, and mutual understanding among all members and all divisions need to be emphasized since all units of the organizations are moving towards the same goals. All units of the organization will gain benefit if the organization is well-organized and constantly growing. Learning environment can not be reached if there is a low level of trustworthiness among the members of the organization since what members have learned will not be shared, transferred, or acknowledged (Thianthai, 2007). Trustworthiness, therefore, has become one of the most important characteristic in organizational communication climate.

Communication climate in an organization reflects the accepted atmosphere and nature of communication processes at the workplace. It is a concept that explains how communications are conducted within a workplace environment (Arif, Zubair, & Manzoor, 2012). Communication climate reflects communication on both organizational and personal levels. On the one hand, it includes the estimations of people's attitudes toward communication aspect in the organization (Trombetta & Rogers, 1988); while on the other hand, it includes the extent to which communication in an organization motivates and stimulates workers to meet organizational collective goals (Smidts, Pruyn, & Reil, 2001).

Communication climate emphasises individuals' own evaluation of the communication activities in their workplace. It can be evaluated by knowing if the employees have a clear understanding of what is expected from them and what actions they need to act upon (Crosling & Ward, 2001). Furthermore, communication climate influences employees' behaviour and it determines the values of a particular set of characteristics or attributes of the working environment (Zammuto & Krakower, 1991). Communication climate is based on individualistic perspectives, and therefore, it changes quickly and dramatically. According to Crespell (2007), climate affects the behaviour of individuals through an aggregated psychological measure of the organization or the way people interact with their environment.

In an organizational context, communication climate affects individual's work processes, and therefore, the results of the operations of the organization as a whole. Over the years, both organization and its employees have tried to identify and build a preferable communication atmosphere. Organizations which encourage and empower their employees can create a communication climate strategically, collaboratively, cost-effectively, innovatively, and accountably (Sharma, Gupta, & Wickramasinghe, 2005). Knowing the importance of a positive communication climate, organizations and their employees have extensively tried to create the intended communication atmosphere at the workplace. A conducive and supportive communication climate, therefore, has become a must attribute of a successful organization.

2.3 Information Communication Technology

While learning processes depend on the context for optimizing knowledge transfer, the implementation of knowledge management systems incorporates information communication

technology into these processes. Knowledge management systems are technologies that serve as a repository, communication, or collaboration tool for transferring and retaining knowledge. Embedding knowledge in technology can prevent organizational to lose and allow knowledge to transfer across numerous barriers, such as, time, distance, and convenience. Information technologies alone are not necessarily successful, but as a communication tool they tangibly reinforce individuals' ability to spread and reinforce their knowledge.

Information technology is an important tool for learning organization. In other words, the organization relies massively on modern technology which is most likely to be accurate, easily accessible, and convenient for sharing knowledge. Information technology helps organization and its members to respond to change and increases working effectiveness which eventually leads to organizational development (Thianthai, 2007). Implementation of communication technology; for example, making an integrated web systems for the employees to share their working knowledge and to pass new useful information which improve their work. Communication technology promotes learning organization since it is employed for improving work, sharing knowledge, promoting self-learning and self-improvement for members of the organization (Koonsri, 2005).

Based on the above realization, the need to have extensive research on how developments in technology affect organizational learning has significantly increased. Evidence of the effects on organizational learning of current communication technology is mixed. Kim (2008) found that the use of information from a communication technology generally had a positive effect on performance especially for members who did not have alternative sources of information. By contrast, Haas and Hansen (2005) found that the use of information from communication technology had a deleterious effect on performance, and that the effect was even more negative for experienced teams and teams working in a competitive environment.

New communication technology supported by Web 2.0 advancements has the potential to affect organizational learning and knowledge management more positively than previous generations of systems. While previous systems operated more as knowledge repositories and directories of declared expertise, new systems provide communication capabilities which help the members of organization to acquire, retain, and transmit

knowledge to others. Previous research (Chandavimol, 2001; Phinaisup & Kampan, 2007) found that information communication technology could predict and affect the outcome of organizational learning. However, further research is needed to investigate on how these new and emerging technologies affect organizational learning (Argote, 2011).

2.4 Leadership

Leaders of each organization hold a very important role to guide their organization and its members towards achieving a constantly learning organization. In this case, leadership styles and approaches serve as crucial factors in promoting successful learning organization. Leaders have to continuously promote learning environment through an essential empowerment. The leaders in the organization need to continuously drive their subordinates to attain and transfer knowledge within or outside the organization. According to Gilley and Maycunich (2000), leaderships found in learning organization are likely to be transactional leadership and transformational leadership.

With regards to managing organizational learning, leadership is a strong guarantee of the success of knowledge management within an organization (Phongsichomphu, 2012). Knowledge management cannot be successful without the support from the managerial administrators of the organization. The managers need to provide a clear understanding about concepts and to recognize benefit the organization gained from knowledge management among the employees. Kowledge management also depends on strategic leadership with strong vision, and exchanging and synthesizing of knowledge are at the core of increasing the value of organization which stimulates cooperation and readiness for transmitting knowledge to others (Debowski, 2006).

Managers who are open to change are most likely very successful in leading their organizations towards learning and developing. Srimuang (2005) stated that in order to advance the learning organization must have the ability to become a leader of change. Marquardt (1996) proposed that leaders in learning organization must be those individuals who can conceptualize and ease complicated matter and process. Leaders need to be able to promote transformation in the organization by making employees to understand, to admire, and to follow the organizational learning culture (Yavirach, 2007). Leaders are also greatly responsible of indicating strategic direction and supervising staff's performance, thus, giving

a great impact on organizational learning culture. Additionally, Bass (2000) found that transactional and transformational leaderships were essential for building and maintaining learning organization.

At the psychological learning process, leaders at organizations are required to have sufficient mentoring skills. Mentoring is the process whereby managers provide both formal and informal assistance and support to their subordinates on an individual basis (Orpen, 1997). It is a structured relationship in order to help the subordinates in their efforts to be successful within the organization. Given the casual nature of its processes, mentoring usually involves two types of individuals (Mathews, 2003). First, a mentor is someone who usually has a high ranking, is influential, and is a senior member of the organization with significant experience and knowledge, and second, the mentee is a subordinate who is willing to learn and look for guidance from the experts. Throughout their working interactions, both parties are believed to be receiving mutual benefits. Both of these characteristics are crucial in creating an efficient learning organization culture.

2.5 Networking

Networking, in an organizational context, reflects the relationships that an employee has with the people in his/her working surroundings. Networking involves the individuals with whom employees have social and instrumental ties (Ng & Chow, 2005). In a fast moving and active business environment, modern employees are now required to have the ability to build both formal and non-formal working relationships with other people. Networking requires proactive attempts by individuals to develop and maintain personal and professional relationships with others for the purpose of mutual benefit in their work or career (Forret & Dougherty, 2001).

Networking in an organization can be developed at various levels of organization hierarchy. Cross and Cummings (2004) stated that network ties which are created beyond organizational boundaries and hierarchical levels enhance the job performance of the network participants. This means that the employees are encouraged to built networking ties not only with people at their rank, but also with people from higher or lower ranks as well. According to Janasz and Forret (2008), developing and maintaining such relationships for the purpose of mutual benefit can help individuals to search for and to secure numerous employment

opportunities. Good networking ties with people at a lower rank may help an employee to gain practical benefits, for example, seeking technical help for his/her work. On the other hand, having good networking ties with people of a higher rank may help an employee to gain support for various career advantages, such as, rewards and promotions. These examples imply that the benefits of personal networking are affected by different network characteristics and levels.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, this paper proposes a new conceptual framework (see Figure 1). In this framework, communication climate, information communication technology, leadership, and networking are assumed as influential factors in developing organizational learning at the workplace. Furthermore, organizational learning is believed to have a significant influence towards job performance.
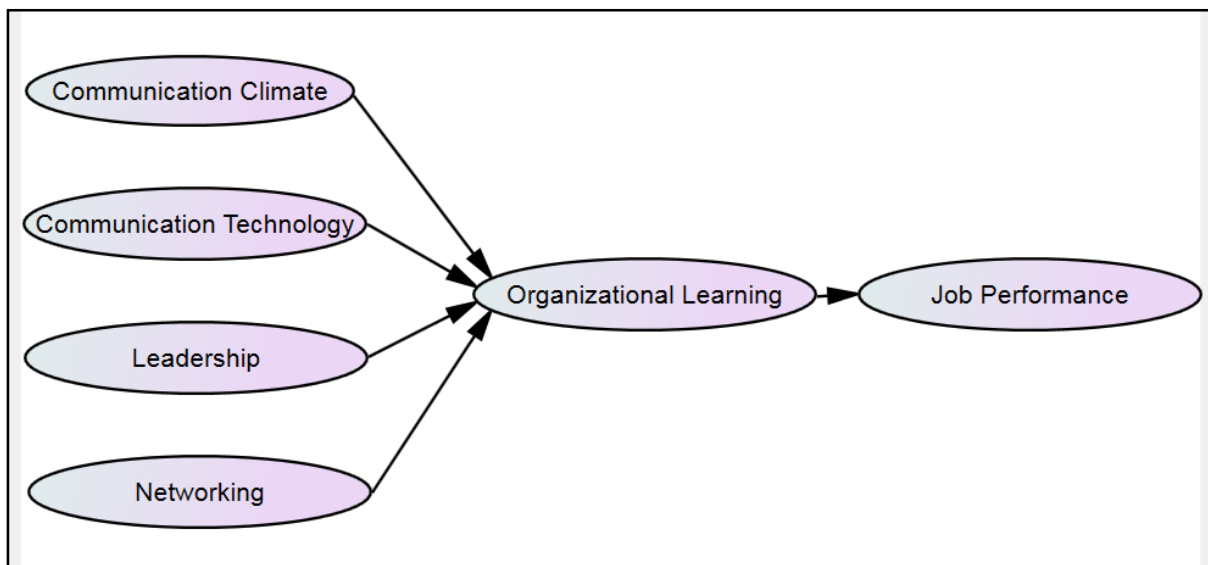

Figure 1: The proposed model

2.7 Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: There is a significant influence of organizational communication climate on organizational learning.

H2: There is a significant influence of information communication technology on

organizational learning.

H3: There is a significant influence of leadership on organizational learning.

H4: There is a significant influence of networking on organizational learning.

H5: There is a positive relationship between organizational learning and job performance.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Future Research Plans

To fulfill the objectives of the study and test the hypothesis the authors of this paper proposes the adoption of a cross-sectional survey research method. Cross-sectional survey is a research method where data are collected at one point of time from selected samples representing a larger population. Sincero (2012) lists some well-defined advantages of the cross-sectional survey research method that may help this study to reach all of the objectives. First, this method will help this study to reach a high representativeness of the sample. This method requires researcher to collect data from a large sample size which is suitable for the population of this study. Second, the data collected will provide a good statistical significance which is required for any quantitative study. Third, the use of questionnaire will lead into a low cost and quick data gathering for the huge sample size. Lastly, a cross-sectional survey research method is believed to be the best way to avoid researcher prejudices, and thus, gives more precise results. Considering the above advantages, therefore, a cross-sectional survey research method is believed to be the most relevant design the quantitative approach of this study.

3.2 Population of the Study

As for the population of study, the authors intended to conduct a comparative study between two higher learning institutions from two different settings. To do so, a prominent university from two developing countries will be chosen, namely, Telkom University and Qatar University. Telkom university represents a rapidly growing private university, while Qatar University represents a well-develop government university with already reached stability. An equal number of academic staff will be chosen to the respondents of the study.

3.3 Data Analysis

With regards of data analysis, the authors suggest to apply both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics will help the researchers to describe the standings of the variables selected by the study on both universities. This analysis involves the frequency, percentage, mean, maximum, minimum, standard deviation, and variance which will be displayed using figures, graphs, and statistical tables. While on the application of inferential statistics, the authors propose of using the correlations, regression, t-test, and the analysis of variance. These analyses will help the researches to test hypotheses as well making comparisons. Last but not least, to validate the proposed model, the authors suggest applying the Structural Equation Model (SEM) together with its prerequisites, namely, factor analysis and model fit.

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