Environment, management attitude, and organizational learning in alliances

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for organizational learning in an alliance-based context. An interaction effect of environmental turbulence on the relationship between top management attitude towards learning and organizational learning is proposed.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper begins with the notion that alliances provide an opportunity for organizations to learn from one another. The paper describes three basic tenets of organizational learning. It then proposes how top management attitude will affect these. It also proposes that these relationships will be affected by the environment in which the organizations are operating.

Findings – The proposed framework makes clear that, for organizational learning to take place, both top management attitude toward learning and environmental turbulence will affect the way organizational learning takes place.

Practical implications – The paper proposes an important relationship between top management attitude, environmental turbulence, and organizational learning. In highly turbulent environments, even a positive top management attitude will not always help to improve organizational learning.

Originality/value – The paper fills a gap in the alliance and organizational learning literature by proposing environmental effects on the relationship between top management attitude and organizational learning.

Keywords Learning organizations, Attitudes, Management attitudes

Paper type Conceptual paper

During the last two decades the world economy has experienced an extraordinary transformation. Intensified global competition and reorganization of economic boundaries have significantly shortened the product and process lifecycles forcing firms to develop a continuous stream of innovation (Achrol, 1991). To be successful, organizations must not only process information but also acquire and create new information and knowledge. To this end, organizational learning creates competitive advantage by increasing marketing capabilities leading to desired outcomes (Bell *et al.*, 2002; Das and Kumar, 2007, 2009). Indeed, organizational learning may be the only competitive advantage for firms in the future (Stata, 1989).

Organizational learning is a well-researched area in the marketing and management disciplines. Many researchers have discussed organizational learning in many different contexts. Bell *et al.* (2002) presented a review of organizational learning

literature organized into four different schools of thought - namely, economic, developmental, managerial, and process. Slater and Narver (1995) examined the effect of market orientation on organizational learning and performance. Hamel (1991), Inkpen (1998, 2000), and Hamel and Prahalad (1993) examined organizational learning in an alliance-based context (Das and Kumar, 2007, 2009). Crossan *et al.* (1999) discuss the process of organizational learning. Argyris (1976), Argyris and Schön (1978), and Senge (1990) explained the differences between single loop (adaptive) and double loop (generative) learning processes, and Miller (1996) discusses many different modes of organizational learning. However, to our knowledge, most of these studies are context free in terms of both the external environment and the internal organizational environment. In the strategy development process, the role of environmental conditions has been discussed extensively (Hofer, 1975, Miles and Snow, 1978, Miller and Friesen, 1983, Hunt and Morgan, 1995, Balachandran and Friar, 1997). Based on contingency theory (Hofer, 1975, Bourgeois, 1985, Burns and Stalker, 1994), aligning of strategies and processes to environmental conditions results in better outcomes. Hence, the focus of this paper is on the conditions fostering or hampering organizational learning in an alliance-based context. Specifically, we present a framework of inter-organizational learning in alliances under varied environment conditions and top management attitudes. First, we define strategic alliances, reasons for forming alliances, and then we define inter-organizational learning and how it is affected by top management attitude. We also propose that the relationship between top management attitude and inter-organizational learning is moderated by environmental turbulence.

Conceptual framework

Strategic alliance. Strategic alliances involve the pooling of specific resources and skills by the cooperating organizations to achieve common goals, as well as goals specific to each individual partner (Das, 2006; Das and Kumar, 2007, 2009). Parkhe (1993) defines strategic alliances as, "relatively enduring interfirm cooperative arrangements, involving flows and linkages that utilize resources and/or governance structure from autonomous organizations, for the joint accomplishments of individual goals linked to the corporate mission of each sponsoring firm" (p. 795). Each partner firm seeks to leverage their limited resources and capabilities by transferring them to and from their connected relationships striving toward the complementarity of their activities across the various relationships (Hamel and Prahalad, 1993; Das and Kumar, 2009). Gaining access to new markets, accelerating the pace of entry into new markets, sharing of research and development, manufacturing, and/or marketing costs, broadening the product line, filling product line gaps, protecting competitive position in the home market, reducing potential threat of future competition, raising entry barriers, overcoming entry barriers, enhancing resource use efficiency, extending resources, and learning new skills are among the motives underlying the entry of firms into strategic alliances (Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995). The various theoretical frameworks advanced to explain the evolution of strategic alliances suggest that market uncertainty, drive for increased efficiency, resource dependence, skills and resource heterogeneity, and imperfect factor markets drive firms to form alliances in their quest for competitive advantage. Webster (1992) notes that "there are multiple types of strategic alliances, virtually all are within the theoretical domain of marketing as they involve partnerships with customers or resellers or with real or potential competitors

for the development of new technology, new products and new markets" (p. 8). Alliances are an economical and flexible way to cope with increasing market turbulence, uncertainty, and scope (Day, 1995). There are many benefits of alliances but these benefits are not cost-free. Some costs identified by Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995) are:

- the time spent by management to negotiate, implement, and integrate the alliance;
- the loss of flexibility and freedom of action in the areas of joint interest;
- leakage of proprietary knowledge to the alliance partner; and
- the atrophying of firm capabilities in areas of alliance activity that have been given up to the partner.

Inkpen (1998) notes that formation of a learning alliance is an acknowledgement that the alliance partners have useful knowledge. If the knowledge were not useful, there would be no reason to form a learning alliance (Das and Kumar, 2007; Robson *et al.*, 2008).

Organizational leaning. In bringing together firms with different skills and knowledge bases, alliances create unique learning opportunities for the partner firms (Inkpen, 1998). "Organizational learning is the acquisition of new knowledge by the actors who are able and willing to apply that knowledge in making decisions or influencing others in the organization" (Miller, 1996, p. 486). Organizational learning is both a function of access to new knowledge and the capabilities for using and building on such knowledge. The economic school, proposed by Bell *et al.* (2002), presents the development of learning based on continuous production. Their second school, the developmental school, presents learning as a process in stages and focuses on higher order learning. Their managerial school also focuses on higher order learning but ignores the stages. Finally, their process school includes all forms of learning and focuses on the underlying processes regarding the nature and style. Miller (1996) describes six modes of learning including analytical, synthetic, experimental, interactive, structural, and institutional. In an alliance based context, interactive learning most commonly occurs. In interactive learning, learning occurs by the exchange of information and evaluation of transactions that reveal the motives, resolve, and resources of rivals and allies within and outside the organization. Interactive learning allows managers to exchange a good deal of information with one another, which fosters more realistic collaboration (Miller, 1996; Das and Kumar, 2007)). Argyris (1976), Cohen and Levinthal (1990), and Crossan *et al.* (1999) discuss many additional types and processes of learning.

Single-loop learning (Argyris, 1976) is the activity, which adds to the knowledge base, or firm-specific competence, or routines of the firm without altering the nature of the activity. This is analogous to *adaptive learning* as described by Senge (1990). Alternatively, generative learning (Senge, 1990), or double-loop learning (Argyris, 1976), requires new ways of viewing the world to understand customers and competitors. This occurs when the organization is willing to question long held assumptions about its missions, customers, capabilities, or strategy (Slater and Narver, 1995; Das, 2006; Vänttinen and Pyhältö, 2009).

Inter-organizational learning can be achieved by transferring existing knowledge from one partner firm to another partner firm, as well as by creating completely new knowledge through interaction among the firms. Thus, both single and double loop learning can occur through alliance partners (Das and Kumar, 2007).

Perceived transparency. Transparency also represents a perception of openness of the firm to its alliance partner. Asymmetry in transparency pre-ordains asymmetric learning (Hamel, 1991; Chay *et al.*, 2007). Firms may adopt a strategy of more or less transparency. However, some firms and some skills are inherently more transparent than others. Transparency can be influenced through the design of organizational interfaces, the structure of joint tasks and the protectiveness of individual partners. Since knowledge and skills represent power, it is not surprising to find firms protecting their transfer to alliance partners particularly when the embodied knowledge or skill is explicit (Hamel, 1991). Alliance partners can adopt explicit measures to limit the transparency of their competencies. The nature of partner interactions may range from operational information exchange necessary to run the alliance to the sharing of more strategic information. Openness in the relationship determines to a large degree the amount of information shared (Inkpen, 2000). Inkpen (2000) defines openness as the willingness and ability of the alliance partner to share information and communicate openly. Transparency also depends on the tacitness, specificity, and complexity of knowledge or skill.

Tacitness is the implicit and non-codifiable accumulation of skills that result from learning by doing. The degree of tacitness of a particular competency or skill influences transfer outcomes (Simonin, 1999). Tacit knowledge is not easily visible and hard to formalize, making it difficult to communicate or share with others. In contrast, explicit knowledge is systematic and easily communicated in the form of hard data or codified procedure (Inkpen, 1998; Choi *et al.*, 2008).

Specificity refers to transaction specific skills and assets (Simonin, 1999). The main issue with specificity relates to the ease with which a skill or asset can be redeployed to alternative uses and by alternative users without loss of productive value.

Complexity refers to the number of independent routines, individuals, technologies, and resources linked to a particular knowledge, skill, or asset (Simonin, 1999). Complexity impairs comprehending the totality of a skill and prevents its transferability. Hence we offer proposition one here, and present it graphically in Figure 1.

P1. Perceived transparency of partner firm is positively related to level of organizational learning.

Intent. Hamel (1991) characterized the objectives of alliance partners, with respect to inter-partner learning and competence acquisition in terms of internalization versus substitution. Firms that conceive of competitiveness as competence-based, rather than as product-based, will seek to close skill gaps rather than compensate for skill failures, and thus, will have an internalization-intent. Firms with an internalization-intent will generally experience organizational learning. The intent to internalize also depends on management's perception of the payoff from learning. Internalization intent is strongest when management perceives the skill to be acquired from the partner as critical to the growth of the entire company, and not just the competitiveness of a single product or business (Hamel, 1991). A substitution intent pre-ordains asymmetric
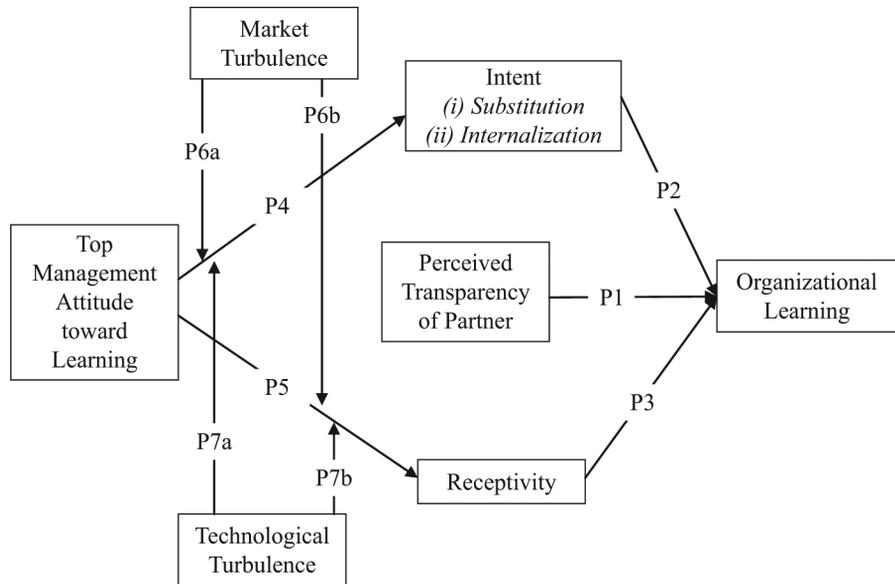
Figure 1.

learning, and for systematic learning to take place, operators must possess an internalization intent. In an alliance based context, very little or no organizational learning will occur if a firm has a substitution intent as the firm views the alliance partner only as a substitute for its lack of skills. A firm with no ambition beyond investment avoidance and substitution of its partner's competitiveness for its own lack of competitiveness will likely not learn from its partner. In this case, the firm perceives the pay-off from learning as lower than the cost of continued dependence on its alliance partner. Viewed in this way, an internalization intent and substitution intent represents two ends of a continuum. Hence we propose the following:

P2. Internalization intent is positively related to level of organizational learning.

Receptivity. Receptivity is the ability of a firm to actually absorb skills from its alliance partners (Hamel, 1991). This is similar to absorptive capacity as discussed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990) and knowledge acquisition effectiveness discussed by Inkpen (2000). Receptivity is the ability to recognize and assimilate valuable knowledge from a particular alliance partner. Some organizations may lack the capacity to learn and some firms may be inherently more receptive than others. Asymmetry in receptivity pre-ordains asymmetric learning (Hamel, 1991). Hence we propose the following:

P3. Receptivity is positively related to level of organizational learning.

Top management attitude toward learning. Attitudes are learned states that influence the choice of personal action the individual makes toward persons, objects, or events (Dodgson, 1993; Chakraborty *et al.*, 2007). The management of knowledge has become an important role for top management (Prahalad and Hamel, 1994). Successful, organizations must not only process information but must also acquire and create new information and knowledge. Based on the top management's attitude toward learning,

in some alliances, partners aggressively seek to acquire knowledge and skills where as in others' the partners take a more passive approach to knowledge acquisition and learning (Vänttinen and Pyhältö, 2009). Some firms purposefully adopt structures and strategies to encourage learning. These firms not only react to the environment, but also proactively seek to influence the environment in which they learn (Dodgson, 1993; Svensson and Wood, 2005). Firms that purposefully develop structures and strategies to enhance organizational learning have been termed learning organizations. They facilitate learning for all their members and continually transform themselves (Pedler *et al.*, 1989). In learning organizations a climate in which individual members are encouraged to learn and to develop to their full potential exists. They instill a positive attitude toward learning. These organizations will adopt the philosophy of generative learning rather than adaptive learning following top management's attitude. This will ultimately affect the intent of the organization and will result in internalization (learning) of skills rather than substitution of skills (Figure 1 presents this relationship graphically).

In addition, if top management has a positive attitude toward learning, it will allocate more resources, and will invest to increase receptivity (e.g. absorptive capacity), and give support for higher organizational learning. Hence we offer propositions four and five.

P4. A positive top management attitude toward learning is positively related to level of internalization intent and negatively related to substitution intent.

P5. A positive top management attitude toward learning is positively related to level of receptivity for learning.

Environmental turbulence. In the face of major discontinuities in the environment, firms are likely to find themselves lacking in the broader set of skills and resources needed to effectively compete in the changing marketplace and, hence, demonstrate a greater propensity to enter into alliances with firms possessing complementary resources and skills (Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995). Environmental turbulence (uncertainty) as defined by Milliken (1987) is the perceived inability of an organization's key managers to accurately assess the external environment of the organization or the future changes that might occur in that environment. Turbulence (uncertainty) results from scarcity and environmental fluctuations. According to resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), inter-organizational exchange arises from uncertainty regarding the availability of productive inputs and markets for finished goods (demand). The scarcity of resources increases uncertainty about the availability of both the supply of inputs and demand for outputs. Uncertainty exists when an organization is unable to assign a subjective probability to the outcome of its actions (Keister, 1999). Hence, environmental turbulence (uncertainty) may be defined as external dynamism and unpredictability. It has two prominent dimensions, market turbulence and technological turbulence. The task environment, i.e. conditions external to the firm, affects the organization's internal behaviors and functioning. Market turbulence specifies the changes in the composition of customers and their preferences (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). Technological turbulence, on the other hand, is the rate of technological change in a given market (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). Technological turbulence specifies the amount and unpredictability of change in production, process, or service technologies. Turbulence in the form of frequent changes in technology or

market preferences requires organizations to adjust to those changes. Technological complexity and volatility have been found to be associated with the formation of alliances (Hagedoorn, 1993).

Literatures in both strategic management and organizational theory point to the potential increases in performance that can occur when businesses match themselves to their environments (Bourgeois, 1985; Burns and Stalker, 1994; Henard and Szymanski, 2001). An aligning of strategies and processes to the environmental context can be important for improving organizational performance. Contingency theory, which is discussed in the following, explains the performance effect of the environment-strategy match.

Contingency theory explains firm performance contingent on other variables (Hofer, 1975; Hunt and Morgan, 1995; Balachandran and Friar, 1997). We adopt the environment-strategy-structure-performance paradigm. The paradigm states that firms will maximize performance when strategy and structure fit the environment (Miles and Snow, 1978; Miller and Friesen, 1983). Strategic contingency theorists maintain that an appropriate fit between strategy and environment helps in achieving superior results.

Based on the previous discussion, when market turbulence is high, i.e. the changes in the composition of customers and their preferences is frequent, though top management attitude toward learning might be high, firms will have higher substitution intent than internalization intent (matching the strategy with the environment) as it takes time and other resources to internalize a skill and exploit it. In high market turbulence, markets may change by the time a firm internalizes and exploits the skill from its partner. Hence we propose:

> P6a. The relationship between top management attitude toward learning and intent for learning will be moderated by market turbulence such that when market turbulence is high, it will reduce the positive effect of top management attitude on internalization intent and negative effect on substitution intent.

When market turbulence is high, though the attitude of top management toward learning might be positive, it may not allocate sufficient resources for receptivity of the skills (changing strategy to fit the environment). Hence we propose:

> P6b. The relationship between top management attitude toward learning and receptivity will be moderated by market turbulence such that when market turbulence is high, it will reduce the positive effect of top management attitude on receptivity.

Similarly, when technological turbulence is high, i.e. the change in production, process, or service technologies is frequent, firms will have higher substitution intent than internalization intent as it takes time and other resources to internalize a skill and exploit it (matching the strategy with the environment). In high technological turbulence, technology may change by the time a firm internalizes and exploits the skill from its partner. Hence we propose:

> P7a. The relationship between top management attitude toward learning and intent for learning will be moderated by technological turbulence such that when technological turbulence is high, it will reduce the effect of top management attitude on internalization intent and higher substitution intent.

When technological turbulence is high, though the attitude of top management is positive toward learning, it may not allocate sufficient resources for receptivity of the skills (changing strategy to fit the environment). Hence we propose:

P7b. The relationship between top management attitude toward learning and receptivity will be moderated by technological turbulence such that when technological turbulence is high, it will reduce the positive effect of top management attitude on receptivity.

Discussion and implications

Alliances present a learning opportunity for partner firms and an opportunity to gain competitive advantage. However, inter-organizational learning hinges on the ability of the firm to internalize and exploit different types of knowledge. This also depends on the receptivity of the firm and transparency of the partner firm. Strategic alliances are an important means to achieve this objective and alliances can create effective win-win situations for everyone involved. This article proposes that in high environmental turbulence condition, the relationships between top management attitude and intent, and top management attitude and receptivity are moderated by market and technological turbulence.

The article contributes to the literature by examining the importance of top management's attitude toward learning to inter-organizational learning for firms in an alliance based context. A key contribution offered by this article is the model that proposes significant relationships between top management's attitude toward learning and the type of learning that will take place. A long-term attitude suggests internalization while a short-term attitude suggests substitution. In addition, top management's attitude will affect the organization's culture and structures which are reflected in its receptivity to new knowledge. However, both of these relationships are moderated by market and technological turbulence, which is an important issue as can be seen in the recent environmental changes related to the 2008-2009 recession. In the case of such extreme turbulence in both markets and technology, one might expect more alliance activity to gain substitute knowledge for short-term survival. While pro-learning top management would also be putting in place structures to facilitate integrative learning to position their organizations for the long-term. These propositions contribute to both strategic alliance literature as well as organizational learning literature.

Conclusion and future research

This article addresses the question of differing alliance successes based on organizational learning in different external environmental situations. If our propositions are supported, it will provide support to the importance of top management attitude toward learning on the intent and receptivity of organizational learning. It will also show that environmental turbulence affects the relationship between top management attitude toward learning and intent and receptivity. It may help researchers and managers to make useful distinctions in examining the sources and facilitators of organizational learning.

Through this framework and these propositions we hope to encourage future empirical research whose results would facilitate greater managerial understanding especially the moderating effect of environmental turbulence. There are no measures

available for some of the constructs. Thus, developing and testing measures for these constructs would be an important aspect of future research. Future research may also investigate the hierarchical relationship between intent, receptivity, and transparency. An additional construct not referenced here, but important in relationships is "trust." Future research may also investigate the effect of trust between organizations on various aspects of transparency for organizational learning.

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