

An Empirical Study on the Presence of Learning Organizations in the Telecommunication Industry of Sri Lanka

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Introduction

One of the toughest challenges faced by managers in the contemporary workplace is to get people focused on adaptive changes in order to meet the demands of a turbulent and rapidly changing environment (Bierly *et al*, 2000; Daft, 2011). The global expansion of organizations and technological advances predict that organizations should think in new ways and learn new values and attitudes as a strategic choice in order to compete in the new marketplace (Heifetz and Laurie, 2003). As technology and globalization are accelerated, organizations find themselves incorporating a learning culture to solve performance challenges, meet new customer expectations and to face the rising costs of doing business.

Research on the link between organizational culture and performance has increased substantially in the past twenty years. There is little doubt that an organizational culture oriented towards supporting learning can lead to improved performance. Many studies confirm this, and also suggest that the path towards performance improvement is highly complex and idiosyncratic (Harrim, 2008). But what is clear from research and practice is, organizations need tools to help them figure out where they are and where they need to be.

The importance of learning was first put forward by a Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551 - 479 BC) and he believed that everyone should benefit from learning (Thomas and Allen, 2006). Even though the original idea of LO has been around for many years it was only popularized in the 1960s-1980s by the work of major writers such as Senge (1990) Argyris (1993) Watkins & Marsick (1993) Braham (1996) Denton (1998) Garratt (1995) Schein (1996) and Pedler *et al*. (1997) in the field (Yeo, 2005). These definitions are linked by the common theme "viewing organizational learning as a driver of organizational performance and competitive advantage". This theme reinforces the earlier view that as members learn collectively, they (as an organization) will react more strategically to external challenges and perform better than their competitors (Yeo, 2005).

The intense changes which are now taking place on the global arena are bound to have extensive implications for nations, organizations and individuals. Hence, the management concepts and frameworks put forward by the pioneers in the field has become less realistic and practical in countries where the socio, economic and legal fabrics are mainly influenced through sheer politics and bureaucracy. Hence, this study attempts to reveal that creating LOs will eventually help organizations to manoeuvre against the unforeseen changes and create belongingness among employees (what is identified as a learning community).

Methodology

In any organic-system, learning is vital to the growth and development of an organization with the focus of improving the problem solving abilities of its members. Though there has been a number of significant research done on LOs in the West, in the Sri Lankan context there exists a clear vacuum. Although many in the corporate sector do understand the role played by a learning culture in the areas of human resource development, the practical implication of such are very rare. The future of Sri Lankan corporate sector lies on how they create a tradition of

LO. It is seen that Sri Lanka will be a major player in the region, provided its service capacity especially in the telecommunication industry. The existence of LOs will add advantages to these organisations with its competencies and so forth. Hence, this research has been carried out to uncover the very existence of LOs in the Sri Lankan telecommunication industry while focusing on seven (07) dimensions of LOs and the two (02) key result areas (financial and knowledge performance) in an organization which were identified by Marsick and Watkins (2003). Thus, the following two (02) hypothetical relationships has been tested in this study.

H₀₁ There is no relationship between the structural level LO dimensions and the key result areas of the organization

H₀₂ There is no relationship between the people level LO dimensions and the key result areas of the organization

This research can be placed in the positivist camps, which has utilized a survey strategy and a deductive research approach that has been facilitated by primary (questionnaires) and secondary data collection methods. To collect the necessary data, a sample of 05 major telecommunication sector organizations (operators) and 49 senior executives from those 05 organizations have being selected using the persuasive sampling technique under the non probability sampling method. The data collected in the study is being analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) 16.0 software and descriptive statistics (mainly the mean), analysis of variance (ANOVA) and correlation was employed for the statistical treatment of data.

Results and Discussion

As per the mean values in Table 1 it is evident that the concept of LO does exist in the organizations operating in the Sri Lankan telecommunication industry. Further, the selected 07 LO dimensions has facilitated in creating this learning culture in the selected sector. When considering the salient dimensions associated with the stated learning culture, the most prominent dimension is creating continuous learning opportunities. It could be said that, out of the 07 dimensions of LO, the major contributors for the presence of the concept of LO are; creating continuous learning opportunities, creating systems to capture and share learning and encouraging collaboration and team learning.

Table 1. The existences of the LO dimensions in the Sri Lankan telecommunication industry.

	Dimensions of Learning Organizations	Mean Value
Structural level	Systems to capture & share learning	4.122
	Connect the organization to its environment	3.899
	Strategic leadership for learning	3.197
	Continuous learning opportunities	4.190
People level	Promoting inquiry and dialogue	3.829
	Encouraging collaboration & team learning	4.091
	Empowering people towards a collective vision	3.831

The findings of ANOVA analysis signifies that there is a significant relationship between the LO dimensions (structural level $p = 0.006$ and people level $p = 0.012$) and key result areas in the telecommunication sector. Hence, as per this study both H_{01} and H_{02} has been rejected while accepting H_{a1} and H_{a2} . The relationship between structural level LO dimensions and financial performance ($p = 0.008$) are more significant than the relationship between structural level LO dimensions and knowledge performance ($p=0.027$). However when considering the relationship

people level LO has with financial performance ($p = 0.135$) and knowledge performance ($p = 0.004$), a stronger association is visible between people level LO and knowledge performance compared to the association between people level LO and financial performance. Finally based on these, it could be said that the presence of structural level LO dimensions such as systems to capture & share learning, connecting the organization to its environment and providing strategic leadership for learning, are directly related with financial and knowledge performance of the organizations operating in the telecommunication industry.

Further, as per the correlation analysis both structural level (correlation coefficient = 0.263) and people level (correlation coefficient = 0.221) LO dimensions have a strong positive correlation with the key result areas of the organizations in the telecommunication industry.

Conclusions

As per this study, it is evident that the concept LO is already being practiced in organizations in the telecommunication industry of Sri Lanka up to a satisfactory level. Since, structural level dimensions of LO's which are associated with the organization's structure is strongly related with the financial and knowledge performance of the organization's, to enhance the existing learning culture the senior management of the respective organizations should concentrate more on the structural level elements rather than the people level elements of LO's. Moreover, at present the continuous learning practices that are prevailing in the organization culture have enabled the major telecommunication service providers to gain a huge market share in the country.

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