

Learning Organizations in Developing Countries: Investigations on the Individual Level.

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ABSTRACT:- The learning process is essential for the success of any company. New knowledge, combined with continuous changes and improvements, resulted to be essential for companies all around the world. Companies can differentiate their activities and create benefits if they are attentive toward new skills and practices. While organizational learning is a process that exists in all companies, learning organizations are called only those companies that have some specific characteristics.

This paper aims to investigate how companies in a developing country consider organizational learning. Individual perception is explored through the Dimensions of Learning Organizations Questionnaire (DLOQ). Continuous learning and encouraged dialogue are two dimensions selected to be measured. Findings of this study reveal a moderate level of organizational learning. Interestingly enough, leaders score high in their ability to support learning within the company. Detailed results are introduced for each statement of the questionnaire, aiming to have a better analyze.

Questionnaires are sent by e-mail and in-person to different businesses and are collected from January to March 2020. This is a descriptive research study aiming to find some characteristics of organizations regarding the learning topic. Data are analyzed using SPSS software.

KEYWORDS:- Continuous learning, Dimensions of Learning Organizations Questionnaire (DLOQ), Learning organizations, Organizational learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The ability to learn is a priority for businesses that wish to compete effectively,” wrote [1]. Globalization and technology are affecting the way economic entities get information. The right information is an advantage that could be used to enhance the overall performance of the firm. Thus, knowledge is considered as a resource that can create successful companies. Successful firms include themselves in learning events aiming to master their abilities.

Bedeian [2] stated that one of the challenges that companies face is organizational learning. It is generally accepted that organizations and individuals use different ways to learn. However, organizations manifest individual knowledge [2], and this is the reason why companies invest in training and other forms of education toward their employees.

Experience and actions are connected to organizational learning [3], which means that employees reveal their learning approach in the company by what they do. Learning is translated into actions which influence the performance of the company. Individuals are invaluable resources that need to be subjects of significant investments. Their possibility to acquire knowledge needs to be encouraged and well-managed. Only in this way, the commitment and efforts of the staff can gather together, creating synergy and achieve the goal of the firm.

This research intends to explore mainly the individual level using the Dimensions of Learning Organizations Questionnaire (DLOQ) of Marsick and Watkins [4]. According to them, the learning culture of the organization is an outstanding value that can bring significant improvements to the overall performance of the company. In this perspective, it would be interesting to investigate companies that operate in Tirana, a developing country that might reveal new perceptions. Many authors consider essential to study how organizations learn in different cultures ([5], [6]). While limited studies explored Albanian companies related to knowledge, there are no studies found from the researcher, that include the specific topic of learning organizations or the process of organizational learning. As a result, Albania can be an exciting research field for this topic.

Learning is considered a value ([4], [7]) that aims to improve the activity continuously. As a result, when individuals, teams and organizations integrate their learning activity, they foster continuous learning and transformation. This study is focused on the investigation of two dimensions of organizational learning, aiming to understand better the Albanian market, which is a developing country with its own culture.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Learning organizations and organizational learning

Researchers give different definitions to learning organizations. However, there are some common elements used by scholars, which help us identify a learning organization. As we can see from some definitions mentioned above, the ability to transform itself by fostering the learning process is the key feature.

Some of the definitions that researchers have given to a learning organization are:

- “An organization which facilitates the learning of all of its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals” [8].
- “A learning organization continuously transforms itself in the process reciprocally linked to the development of all its members” [9].
- “An organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights” [10].
- “Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” [11].

Not all organizations are learning ones, and this is why managers and practitioners should be aware of their characteristics. Strategic building blocks that learning organizations have in common are considered: mission and vision, leadership, experimentation, transfer to knowledge, teamwork and cooperation [12]. Fifty-five items are used to evaluate those five building blocks using two case studies [3]. Other authors concluded that building blocks for a learning organization should be: a supportive learning environment, processes and practices, leadership that reinforces learning [13]. According to Jamali and Sidani [6], the most important dimensions of a learning organization are employee participation, learning climate, systematic employee development, continuous learning and experimentation and learning rewards.

According to Burgoyne [9], learning organizations have a set of characteristics. Each of the features considered important are explained below.

1. A learning approach to strategy- The main goal behind making decisions and execute them is learning. Whatever companies do during their daily activities, there is always something to learn from.
2. Participative policymaking- Companies take into consideration opinions from many levels of the organization and for different issues regarding the necessity of pursuing new paths.
3. Informing: open information systems- Information technology nowadays is vital for companies. It is an effective way that helps employees learn more about the company, having the opportunity to be a part of it easily.
4. Formative accounting and control- Companies analyze the data to learn about the performance of specific elements that might influence the performance of the company.
5. Mutual adjustment between departments- Departments cooperate by modifying their programs or processes using reciprocal agreements. There are no managers that play the role of mediators.
6. Reward flexibility- It means that organizations reward their employees for learning. Methods used to do so might be different.
7. Adaptable structure- Organization have complex structures, but it is essential to be able to transform the relationship between sectors or processes when it is necessary.
8. Boundary workers at environmental scanners- Companies consider first its internal possibilities for finding the information they need.
9. Inter-organizational learning - It happens when companies learn from their partners in business.
10. Learning culture and climate- People deal with mistakes constructively, trying to understand the real reasons, aiming to find the right solutions. It is not the idea of pointing out or punishing who did it.
11. Self-development opportunities for all- Individuals within the organization have the right opportunities to develop their skills and enhance their performance.

Academic institutions have been many times the focus of researchers ([14], [15]), where they investigated learning issues. Institutions, where learning is the reason for its existence, are seen as environments that can show us more about this vital process. In this point of view, individuals are seen as people that know the importance of learning and can adapt quickly to new circumstances and new environment using the best practices.

While learning organizations present companies, organizational learning is seen as “The process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding” [16]. Scholars stated that it is a process that exists in all companies, although not all the firms can be called learning organizations [17], due to the characteristics that they should incorporate in their activity.

Table nr. 1. Learning organization versus organizational learning (adapted from [17]).

Learning organization	Old organizational learning	New organizational learning
	Process	
Individuals learn	Individuals & organizations learn	Collective learn
Knowledge is stored inside and outside the individuals	Knowledge is stored outside the individuals	Knowledge is not stored
Needs to be created	Exists without any attempt	

According to Örtenblad [17], the new organizational learning means to participate, not store information. In this sense, employees help one another in creating a positive environment where anyone can give his or her contribution. Such contribution and cooperation will foster the company toward innovative ways that can improve the performance [14].

2.2 Main factors investigated

Many relationships between factors are investigated from scholars, aiming to recognize better the connections between crucial elements that affect learning within organizations. Having a clear picture of the interrelations that surround a learning organization will give significant insight that can be used in creating benefits.

Learning culture and creative climate resulted in affecting the process of innovation significantly inside the company [18]. Innovation is the outcome of new knowledge and skills [19], which combined can give impressive results. Positive changes bring situations that can enhance the performance of the company. In this regard, some factors affect more than others, some have opposite effects and others change their behavior due to specific conditions. For example, organizational culture affects organizational learning ([16], [20]), but results show that learning isn't always supported by corporate culture [21]. Moreover, inquiry and dialogue resulted in influencing the performance of the company positively, while continuous learning didn't demonstrate the positive relationship [15]. It proves that constant learning is not enough to promote or enhance knowledge and financial performance [3].

Another element that needs our attention is that focusing on learning itself is not the best choice if it is not integrated with structure, culture and communication techniques [22]. It suggests that companies need the right organizational climate to support and nourish their employees. Learning within the organization can improve job satisfaction ([20], [23]) and the morale of the employees [23]

2.3 Dimensions of a learning organization

Dimensions of Watkins and Marsick are considered crucial elements to be taken in consideration from employees in an organization especially from the HRD (Human Resources Department) ([4], [24]). HR must show their attention toward each of those aspects, aiming to build an innovative climate that can improve itself systematically. Leaders of the company can as well have an impact on learning approach within organizations [20]. Leaders can create a climate and culture within the firm, starting from their knowledge and experience [4]. In this perspective, the learning environment should be promoted consciously by supporting the right strategies that support the goal of the firm.

The learning process on itself can be, organized or non-organized, so-called formal or informal. Both forms are complementary to one another, strengthening each other [25]. The individual level, part of the DLOQ, investigates the informal learning that happens within the organization on its daily bases, considered as a valuable method that can reveal how people behave toward continuous learning and dialogue. From each company, it is expected that employees discuss and help one another during their working hours.

DLOQ is used to measure the level of the learning organization in different cultures and is confirmed to be a reliable tool. It is also suggested as a means that can help the implementation of learning in organizations [26]. For example, DLOQ is put in practice in the textile sector [27] and also is used to track the progress in developing countries [28].

The seven dimensions of a learning organization [4]:

1. *Create continuous learning opportunities*- It represents the possibility offered to employees for ongoing learning within the organization.
2. *Promote inquiry and dialogue*- It represents a culture where anyone can express their opinion but also take into consideration what others think. Employees are encouraged to make questions, to give feedback to others and to test new processes or products.
3. *Encourage collaboration and team learning*- Working in a group is valued and supported by rewards. The cooperation is seen as a vital element that helps the exchange of skills and knowledge.

4. *Create systems to capture and share learning-* Work and learning are combined through adequate systems, facilitating everyone's job.
5. *Empower people toward a collective vision-* Vision is used to encourage employees to join their efforts toward the same goal. Employees are responsible for their tasks, not only by doing but also by making decisions.
6. *Connect the organization to its environment-* People can understand their position in the organization. Accessible information is used to integrate better their job with the environment around them.
7. *Provide strategic leadership for learning-* Leaders motivate the staff to learn, which is going to turn into strategic benefits for the organization.

The first two dimensions make the so-called individual level. Their focus is the behavior or perception of individuals. Through these distinctive features, people can gain ongoing education and growth on the job. They can build the capacity to communicate with one another effectively [28].

According to DLOQ, dimensions can influence knowledge and financial performance. Two crucial elements that every company need to create prosperity. The results proposed about financial performance imply having the right resources to grow the company. Knowledge performance represents the influence that new products and services have on the overall performance of the company. New knowledge can bring effective new ways of doing things, which might have a massive impact on the firm's success. As a result, we can say that business and learning aim to improve themselves continually.

DLOQ represents a snapshot of the employees' perception of the actual situation in their firm, which can be called the weaknesses of this method.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on DLOQ, focusing on the individual level. The questionnaire is sent to employees that work in the capital of Albania, Tirana. Questions used are divided into two parts. Firstly, employees are asked about their personal information. Secondly, important issues are presented through statements, aiming to capture what people think about the learning process within the organization. The number of the total questionnaires collected is 129. The questionnaire is sent by e-mail and in-person from January to March 2020. Data are analyzed through SPSS.

This investigation will help us understand better the individual learning approach since it is a descriptive research study. It will help us find some characteristics of Albanian companies about learning issue. Continuous learning and dialogue are two dimensions of the learning organization that are presented in the questionnaire. For each statement, employees are asked to evaluate them using a six-point scale, like the original model. DLOQ is translated in Albanian, into a new language as suggested by authors of the DLOQ.

The survey included companies from different sectors as; private learning institutions, banks, public institutions and other companies that offer services or products for the Albanian market.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 General data about participants

Important information about the respondents of this study is shown in the table below. The number of total employees, part of this study is 129. Regarding gender, females are around 70%, while male participants 30%. As can be seen from the table, bachelor and master are the levels of education that make nearly 90% of the total respondents, making a high percentage. Interestingly enough, for a higher tenure, there is an increase in the percentage of the participants. However, the biggest group with 32% is in their first year of work. The position of specialists is almost 52% of the sample taken from this study. Managers involved make a small percentage (15.5%).

Table 2. Data about the respondents

		Number	In %
Gender	F	89	69.0
	M	40	31.0
Education	High School	6	4.7
	Bachelor	53	41.1
	Master	65	50.4
	Doctorate	5	3.9
Experience	0-1 years	41	32.0
	2-5 years	35	27.3
	6-10 years	27	21.1
	>10 years	24	18.8%

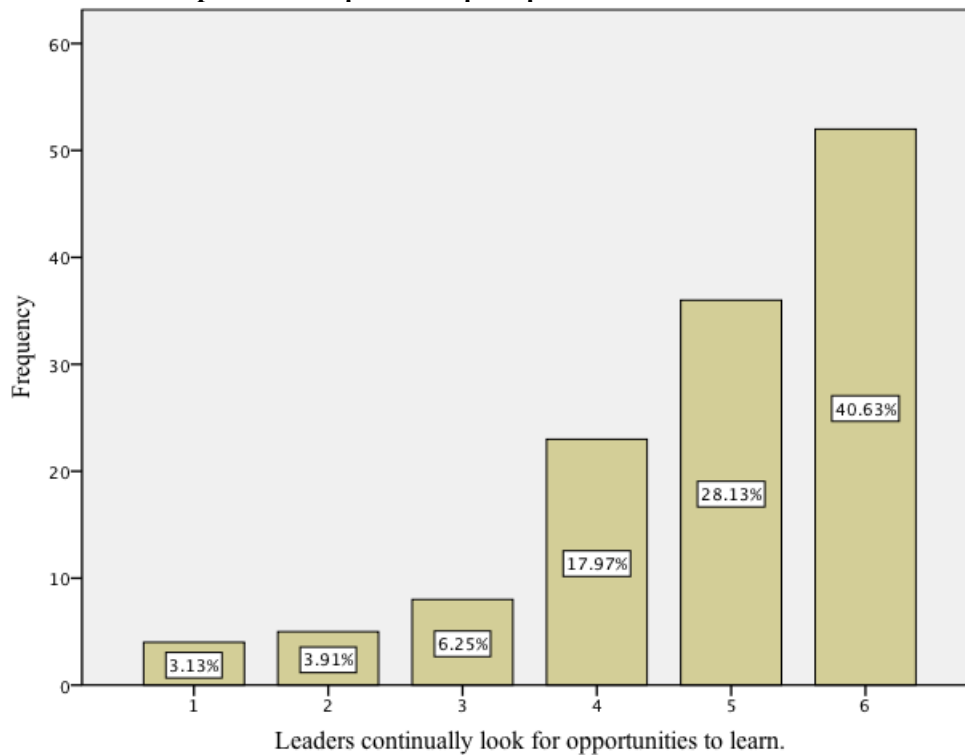
Position	Specialist	67	51.9%
	Supervisor	9	7.0%
	Manager	20	15.5%
	Other	32	24.8%

4.2 Results for each dimension

At first, we will see the results of the single statement presented in the questionnaire, which is not directly part of the dimensions evaluated, but it opens the DLOQ. Respondents are asked to assess their opinion about their leaders. The sentence used, asked to score the ability of leaders to look for learning opportunities. Leaders play an essential role in organizational learning. They can encourage and lead people toward learning using their style and experience. The mean calculated for this statement is 4.85. It is a high score which shows a constructive attitude of leaders toward learning. Since the maximum degree is 6, the mean calculated for the population of this study reveals a favorable position.

The graph below represents the results of the first statement for each degree. It shows that while moving to higher levels, there is a higher percentage of people who responded positively to the statement. For example, level 6 is chosen by 40.6% of the total population, who think that their leaders are continually in search of new opportunities to learn.

Graph 1. The respondents' perceptions about their leaders



The results of all issues studied are given in the table below. For a detailed analyze, the results of each statement are introduced. Comments are numbered as they appear to the questionnaire, aiming to refer to them more easily.

Table nr. 3. Descriptive statistics (N=129)

		Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
	Leaders continually look for opportunities to learn.	4.86	5.00	1.3
	Continuous learning			
1	People openly discuss mistakes in order to learn from.	4.28	4.00	1.43
2	People identify skills they need for future work tasks.	4.36	5.00	1.41
3	People help each other learn.	4.52	5.00	1.22
4	People can get money and other resources to support their learning.	3.46	4.00	1.70
5	People are given time to support learning.	4.14	4.00	1.53

6	People view problems in their work as an opportunity to learn.	4.43	5.00	1.30
7	People are rewarded for learning.	0.87	4.00	1.55
	Total	26.06		
	Mean (26.06/7)	3.72		
	Inquiry and dialogue			
8	People give open and honest feedback to each other.	3.75	4.00	1.39
9	People listen to others' views before speaking.	3.83	4.00	1.40
10	People are encouraged to ask "why" regardless of rank.	4.10	4.00	1.50
11	Whenever people state their view, they also ask what others think.	3.91	4.00	1.44
12	People treat each other with respect.	4.60	5.00	1.37
13	People spend time building trust with each other.	4.22	4.00	1.50
	Total	24.41		
	Mean (24.41/6)	4.06		

The first set of questions belongs to the dimension of continuous learning. The table shows the mean of each statement and also the mean of the dimension, which is 3.72. This score indicates a moderate position in organizational learning. The highest overall rating for this dimension is represented by statement number 3. Other studies prove that the same issue had the highest score compared to all the different aspects of DLOQ [30]. It means that the results of this study scored high in helping each other to learn, similar results with Chajacki [31].

The second set of questions represents the aspect of promoting inquiry and dialogue. Results show again a mean that is slightly above 4. The feature with the highest score is statement number twelve, which scored a mean of 4.60. According to these results, employees perceive a high degree of respect between them, which is an encouraging element that helps in creating a learning climate.

The survey of Watkins and Marsick [4] has shown a liability in its possibility to evaluate the learning organizations in different countries and cultures [30]. According to a presentation of the DLOQ results for several studies [4], the highest mean for the individual level belongs to small family businesses with 5.01. Moreover, the mean of all those eight studies taken into consideration is 4,18 for continuous learning and 4,10 for inquiry and dialogue. Some additional results from other studies are presented in the table below.

Table 4. Means of some DLOQ results across studies

Continuous learning	Inquiry & dialogue	Source	Year
4	4,14	[27]	2009
4.10	4.35	[15]	2011
3.90	3.75	[31]	2011
3.91	3.64	[27]	2014
3.24	3.14	[29]	2015

The individual-level resulted in being a strong factor for sectors like banking and information technology (IT) in developing countries ([28], [30], [32]). A learning culture in the individual level was perceived from non-academic employees of public universities [33]. Interestingly enough, continuous learning resulted in being a dimension that was not sufficiently encouraged, revealing low results [6].

The table above shows that the means of both dimensions are near to each other in values. This study reveals the same behavior. According to results presented in Table 3, inquiry and dialogue have higher results compared to continuous learning. It implies that employees communicate effectively with one another, taking into account other's opinions and also giving feedback. Cooperation and commitment will be the outcomes of a climate where constructive dialogue takes place. As a result, the exchange of skills and knowledge will enhance not only the individual performance but also the performance of the whole company.

V. CONCLUSION

Organizational learning is a field where many scholars have developed their approach due to its importance in the market. Nowadays, having the right knowledge and being able to transmit to the other co-workers is a resource that can significantly change the performance of the company.

Interestingly enough, the ability of leaders to find learning opportunities is scored high with a mean of 4.86. It is the highest score of all the statements assessed in this study.

Findings of this research show that organizations in Tirana have moderate organizational learning regarding individual approach. While continuous learning is assessed by a mean of 3.72, the mean of promoting inquiry and dialogue is 4.07. Both dimensions measured reveal moderate values since the mean is around 4 out of 6. The statement that revealed the highest values has a mean of 4.60, showing that people inside the company treat one another with respect. The next highest value of mean is 4.52 which reveals that co-workers offer a high support for one another.

Limitations of this paper include several issues. Firstly, the research is focused only on the individual approach. Secondly, the sample included only people who worked in the capital of Albania. Thirdly, the respondents did not belong to a single company or sector.

Future research might take in consideration other alternatives. Firstly, it would be interesting to investigate different levels of organizational learning such as team, corporate, global and also compare the results of some companies. The ability of DLOQ to compare results is an important aspect stated by the authors of the DLOQ. Literature proved that organizational culture has a significant impact on organizational learning, and as a result, a company might have different perspectives compared to others. Secondly, studies might investigate the learning culture of companies using DLOQ or other methods and repeat it after some time, aiming to understand more how organizational learning occurs in the long-run. Fourthly, a literature review focusing on the results that studies have found until now might be an exciting approach.

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