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# Organizational Knowledge as a Source of Competitive Advantage-Amazon Case Study

*Ioanna Dimitrakaki*

## SUMMARY

Organizational learning has received significant theoretical and empirical support for its role in improving the performance and competitiveness of organizations. Quite a long time ago, it was argued that the speed of developing and ensuring organizational learning can be the only sustainable source of achieving competitive advantage in the future. The role of speed and the relative "economy" was already understood, because only in this way can a continuous development of organizational knowledge be ensured. It was emphasized that a strong rate of learning and development of organizational knowledge tends to be positively associated with achieving competitive advantage. In essence, a learning organization is able to manage, design and purposefully reshape its culture and strategy to enhance and maximize the potential for organizational learning development. The importance of organizational learning is already apparent, as the ability to learn and knowledge can mean the most important element for an organization - learning how to learn. In the present thesis, the case of Amazon was studied. The research goal, was to understand the organizations culture, and the factors behind the learning and financial success.

*Keywords:* learning, knowledge, culture, competitive advantage, Amazon, innovations, consumers, economic success.

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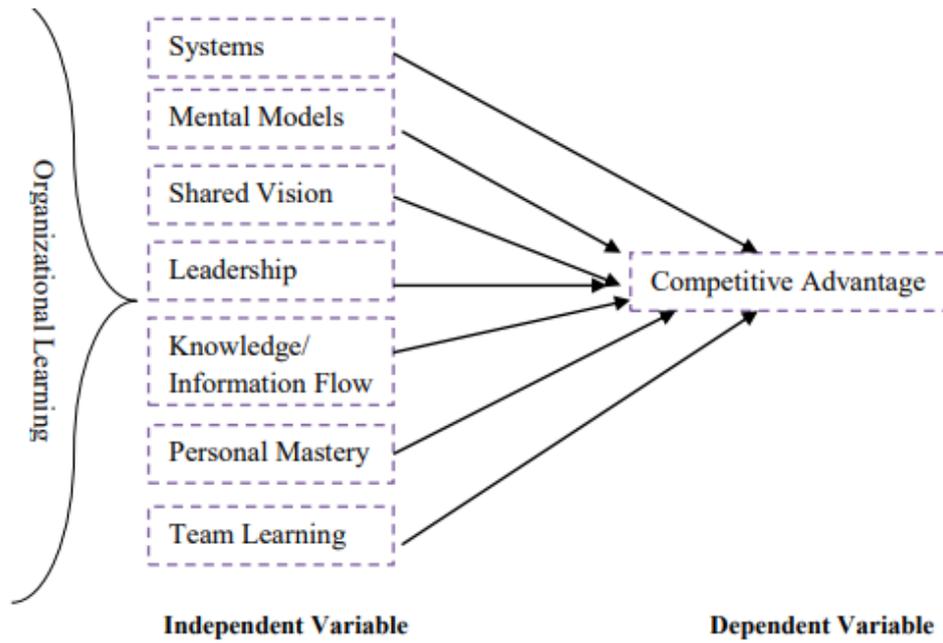
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**Keywords:** learning, knowledge, culture, competitive advantage, Amazon, innovations, consumers, economic success.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning has received significant theoretical and empirical support for its role in improving the performance and competitiveness of organizations (Makabila et al., 2017). Quite a long time ago, Senge, (1990) argued that the speed of developing and ensuring organizational

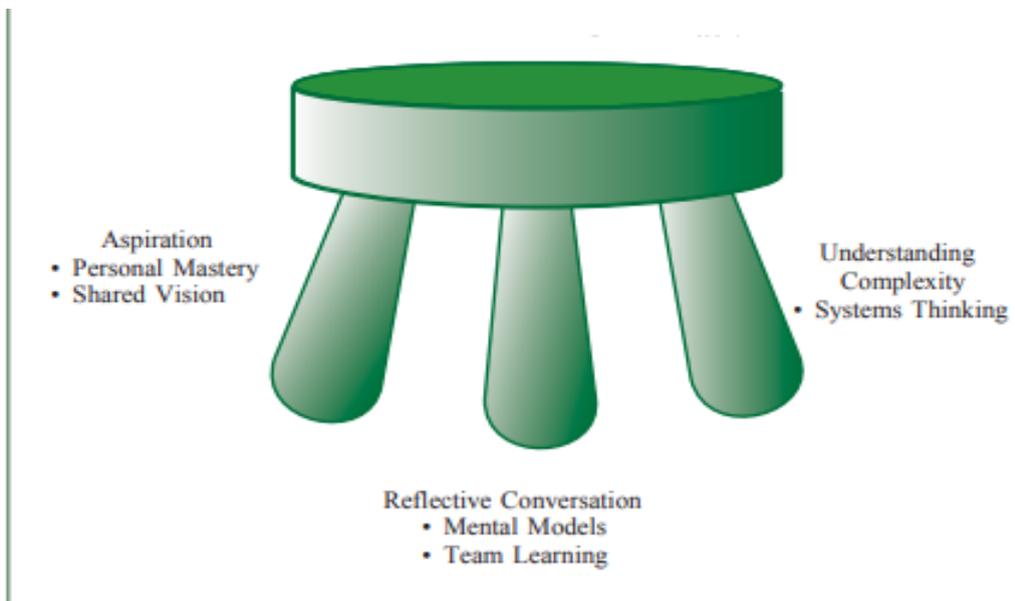
learning can be the only sustainable source of achieving competitive advantage in the future. The role of speed and the relative "economy" was already understood, because only in this way can a continuous development of organizational knowledge be ensured. Garvin, Edmondson and Gino, (2008) emphasized that a strong rate of learning and development of organizational knowledge tends to be positively associated with achieving competitive advantage. In essence, a learning organization is able to manage, design and purposefully reshape its culture and strategy to enhance and maximize the potential for organizational learning development (Makabila et al., 2017). The importance of organizational learning is already apparent, as the ability to learn and knowledge can mean the most important element for an organization - learning how to learn.



Source: Hassan et al., (2017)

Figure 1. Organizational learning and competitive advantage

The figure above shows the connection of achievement of competitive advantage. Many organizations seem to adapt more effectively and rapidly to unpredictable environments (Kransdorff, 2006).



Source: Serrat, (2009)

Figure 2: Core learning capabilities of organizations

Efforts to develop organizational learning are no longer just an option, but rather a basic necessity, for organizations around the world if they are to survive and thrive (Singh and Kant, 2008). The

reason is the ever-increasing rate of changes in the external environment. Changes are no longer just constant, but highly unpredictable and impactful. It can be argued that never before have organizations been in such a precarious position due to a number of factors:

- Technological development (at the level of communication, information exchange, etc.)
- The consequent increase in general connectivity, maximizing the ability of consumers and interest groups to draw information, exchange feedback/criticism/opinions at any time
- The unpredictable creation of new social and professional trends
- The unpredictable influence of all the above on the brand image of organizations. A scandal that can come out of nowhere can be inflated, spread quickly, and have significant (immediate and possibly long-term) consequences for an organization's reputation.
- The ability to transfer "hard knowledge" at the level of operational organization. Now knowledge about optimizing the production process can be found everywhere (it is common knowledge). What differentiates organizations is 'soft skills' and the ability to develop internal processes of continuous knowledge development.

The days when organizations had huge factories and supply lines based on the ownership of significant material resources, are gone. The era, when few companies knew the most important principles of optimization of the production process, has also passed. A successful company can start now (or it is more likely), in a small basement and grow, as long as it has knowledge that cannot be imitated and substituted (rare).

All of the above implies that organizations must ensure that they can keep up with modern trends. Empirical studies have demonstrated the important role that learning plays in enhancing performance in a variety of disciplines. For example, in the public sector, non-governmental organizations, the banking industry, small and medium enterprises, at the level of services and at the level of insurance organizations (Huang et al.,

2011). These studies have shown that learning is an important determinant of organizational success, and that it can indeed lead to superior performance and the realization of a competitive advantage.

Despite the clarity/consistency of research findings and the academic consensus that organizational learning tends to lead to competitive advantage, the rate of adoption of relevant learning practices is still low among organizations, particularly for state-owned companies. This can be reasonable and expected. Organizations tend to rely on practical, commonly accepted solutions over time, on the basis of a hierarchical structure, tried and tested solutions, etc. It is extremely difficult (for many of them) to adopt corresponding philosophies, where trust in the long-term establishment of organizational conditions conducive to the development/transfer of knowledge may be the fundamental priority, as opposed to the achievement of short-term goals.

Many middle and senior managers may not be ready for such radical changes. At the same time, the survival and development of organizations was not and is not an easy task. Organizations that persist in showing resistance, and not changing dimensions of their culture, etc., will possibly tend towards extinction. This low adoption rate is also due to past research inadequacies that have not efficiently provided managers with concrete suggestions on how to gradually make their organizations, learning organizations.

The concept of the learning organization has been widely used in the context of organizational behavior analysis, especially in today's era where survival in the competitive, external environment is a significant challenge (Makabila et al., 2017). An organization that has managed to develop a thriving learning culture may have an increased chance of achieving a competitive advantage. With the existence of effective learning conditions in organizations, strategic directions can be determined by the retrieval of valuable information and insights, while all of the above can be based on organizational memory (Lin, 2008). Furthermore, as organizational excellence

largely entails quality information sharing, the underlying culture in an organization is essential to encourage employees to share the right information, to the right people, at the right place and at the right time (Kumar, 2005). Culture especially helps to increase the chances of achieving a competitive advantage and successfully responding to various changes as it encourages internal learning (Norashikin & Noormala, 2006).

Many advantages derived from learning organizations concern the ability to overcome chaotic and unpredictably changing situations (Hannah & Lester, 2009). At this point, the following should be emphasized: modern management tends to constantly recognize the ever-increasing importance of soft skills (strategic empathy, emphasis on internal communication, creative synthesis of opinions from all levels of an organization, utilization of various perspectives, etc.), in contrast to traditional strategic management that was based on rational planning.

This paradigm shift is not a simple matter. Businesses expect "bullet-point" solutions (especially from the academic community), and this is becoming more and more distant. A key point, perhaps, was the separation of knowledge into explicit and tacit. Nonaka (1995), talked about explicit knowledge, which can be coded, transferred, stored, etc. and tacit knowledge. The second, which was considered extremely important, does not concern mathematical analogies, but knowledge conveyed through observation, the development of strong bonds within the organization, through parables/metaphors, etc.

It can be argued that Knowledge Management has been deeply influenced by the above. Although there is often a technocratic orientation (favoring digital adaptation, technology support, etc.), there is also a leadership and culture orientation concerned with developing the right conditions for creating, sharing and storing knowledge. Therefore, a perspective has prevailed, where the focus is on developing organizational conditions and not on immediate results. The reason is that it is constantly sought to ensure a "fruitful way of

generating future results/solutions". This can also be connected to the philosophy of Gestalt, where the whole is something more than the simple sum of its parts. Therefore, those organizational conditions that will lead to this are constantly being sought. As tacit knowledge was recognized as something very important, the conditions supporting it also became very important. It is no longer enough to attract and select talented (scientifically) staff if they cannot accept the invisible dimensions of the organizational culture, create strong bonds and contribute to the exchange of knowledge. This element, it can be argued, has complicated the reality of organizations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

The culture of a learning organization has been linked to positive organizational outcomes such as enhanced performance (Watkins & Marsick, 1999) and improved firms' innovative capabilities (Kieser & Koch, 2008). The culture of an organization is an extremely deep concept. It can be understood as the invisible part of the organizations (analogous to an iceberg, where 5% of its mass is visible and the rest is hidden).

The origin of the attention to the concept of organizational learning began with the recognition of experience curves (Hoy, 2008). Researchers observed that outputs tended to increase compared to inputs as employees gained experience over time (Argote, 2001; Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Accordingly, members of organizations may gain more knowledge about the industry in which the organization operates and about the company's business model (Hoy, 2008). Organizational members may therefore acquire (under appropriate conditions) a more thorough knowledge of the external environment, always in relation to the internal (the strengths and weaknesses of the organization).

All of the above may refer to the internal ability of organizations to learn from experience, to fruitfully consider and adopt new ideas and finally to transform them into policies and actions, in order to gain some competitive advantage

(Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007; Mitki, Herstein, & Jaffe, 2007).

The focus of scientific research on organizational learning can be grouped into three main themes:

- How routines can act defensively, preventing the development of learning (Adler & Zirger, 1998; Akgün, Lynn, & Byrne, 2003; Argyris & Schön, 1978)
- How changing organizational routines and habits can affect future behavior (Argote & MironSpektor, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2003) and.

- How performance characteristics can be differentiated on the basis of fruitful experience management (Altman & Iles, 1998; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Dutton, 2003; Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang, & Howton, 2002).

From these three themes of organizational learning, several perspectives have emerged that have significantly contributed to the understanding of the concept under study.



Source: Serrat, (2009)

Figure 3: Learning process of organizations

## 2.2 Competitive advantage

In seeking to explain the attainment of a competitive advantage, researchers have offered useful theoretical propositions. Resource-based theory has emphasized that competitive advantage may suggest that firms constitute a unique combination of resources and capabilities and that a firm can gain competitive advantage based on the unique set of the above (Barney, 1991). Resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable and the chances of achieving a competitive advantage also require effective management at the level of resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991).

The fact that resources must enable value creation and must also resist imitation attempts by competitors suggests that firms, in conditions of heightened competition, should try hard. Rival firms will seek to imitate or try to replace resources that are a source of advantage, while organizations facing changing or uncertain conditions must be able to learn and improve.

One perspective, therefore, is that organizational learning can help organizations focus and exploit

their resources and capabilities. For example, Karash (2002) defined the concept of organizational learning as oriented towards the resource-based view (RBV), referring to the ability of an organization to transform standard resources that are available to all, into capabilities that are unique and inimitable.

## 2.3 The concept of organization learning

The concept of organizational learning is a thoroughly explored concept, in a number of fields and disciplines (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2005). Senge, (2006) described the concept as the change in organizational behavior that occurs through a collective learning process. Organizational learning can be seen as a distinct, valuable and inimitable resource, as it is impossible to substitute the conditions of its creation and transfer (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008).

Learning emphasizes the development and application of new ideas and knowledge, which have the potential to influence work behavior, which ultimately can lead to the enhancement of

organizational results and of an organization's position.

A learning organization uses a management philosophy based on knowledge and understanding, as opposed to fear and denial of the complexities of the real world. Therefore, the above can promote a sense of work empowerment, which can increase motivation regarding continuous learning (Bryson et al., 2006).

For learning to be fully embedded in an organization, it must occur at various levels. Argyris and Schön, (1978) have emphasized that organizations learn through individuals who act as agents for them and by the learning activities of individuals, which in turn are facilitated or hindered by a set of internal factors. Organizations cannot learn by themselves, but it is people who learn. However, a learning organization is much more than a sum of learning individuals or a sum of knowledge.

For example, supporting innovation (or new knowledge) refers to people who support an original idea (if they think it's right, of course) and don't feel an automatic "aversion" to something different. In the same context, there are the concepts of creativity and innovation. Not everyone in an organization is creative, but a culture that supports creative/divergent ideas can do wonders.

Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) concluded that individual learning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for organizational learning. Entrenched organizations are organized in such a way that learning takes place at multiple levels: individual, team, cross-functional and organizational/strategic (Britton, 1998).

Organizational learning in organizations can also occur at various functional levels. One level may focus on correcting errors in the existing system while a more advanced one may even question policies and procedures rather than focusing only on error correction (Linz & Resch, 2010).

In the first case, results are assessed against prevailing organizational norms and expectations.

According to Senge, (1990), this is about doing things the right way without necessarily questioning whether what one is doing is right, or if it is the right thing. In the second case (where the innate, full creativity of some employees is accepted), deeply held assumptions, principles, policies, etc. can be challenged. This may not be pleasant, but it can be extremely useful. Again, it is very important to challenge the right assumptions, by the right people (who have the right skills and are not doing it selfishly), in the right place, at the right time.

On the other hand, effects of this magnitude can be extended and possibly lead to the next stage, which is about accepting "the categories/arguments" and starting an open and often powerful exchange of views (Peeters & Robinson, 2015). A learning organization must develop its capabilities on a continuous basis over a long period of time (Senge, 1990). This means that organizations that adopt the analogous culture should have the skills and abilities to produce, transfer (conciliation/debate), use knowledge and transform individuals as agents of reflection of new knowledge (Garvin, 1993). In such an organization, learning and work are combined in an ongoing systematic manner to ensure alignment of individual, team, and organizational improvements (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). It is the learning culture that contributes to all of the above. Culture can be understood as the invisible "glue" that connects all of the above in a strong and sustainable way (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Some important dimensions of a thriving organization's culture are the following:

- Continuous learning. In relation to this, the conditions are developed so that all the inclinations of the organizational members are satisfied.
- The disposition for dialogue and inquiry, where active efforts are made to develop a common ground of tolerance of fruitful dialogue, healthy questioning and experimentation.
- Group learning, which refers to cooperation and the existence of strong ties .
- An integrated system, which will concern everything that is developed at this point.

- The connectivity of the system, or the provision for the existence of ways of translating internal and external stimuli into actions (which will obviously be as commonly accepted as possible).
- Empowerment, related to (among other things) effectively sharing the vision, giving authority at the work control level and respecting any feedback that can lead to significant improvements (even at the vision level).
- Leadership is about ensuring leadership that will be able to bring new directions.

However, it is important to note that organizational performance is difficult to assess and has been measured in a number of different ways (Stankard, 2002). Performance can be a product of unknown interactions of different elements or units in an organization (Stainer, 1999). Learning culture has been shown to influence the performance of organizations that adopt it, as well as achieving competitiveness and enhancing financial performance (Lopez, Peon, & Ordas, 2005).

### III. ORGANIZATIONS PROFILE

Jeff Bezos quit his hedge fund job to start an online bookstore in of his Seattle garage. Now, this company is one of the most highly valued companies in the world, while it has been described as "the most powerful brand". Amazon sells everything from shoes to sofas, to summer gourmet sauces, and has expanded its portfolio with acquisitions of Whole Foods, Zappos, Audible and Twitch to become a dominant force in the world of e-commerce, entertainment content, of cloud computing services and artificial intelligence (fortunegreece, 2019).

Sam Walton founded the Walmart supermarket chain so that the people who worked for him would be able to buy what they needed at a price no more expensive than anywhere else, according to Charles Fishman, author of "The Wal- Mart Effect", who spoke on the subject on the American network ABC. In the early 1990s, consumers would never have considered buying jeans and chicken breasts in the same place, until Walmart changed their shopping habits.

"In exactly the same way that Walmart changed the way we think about shopping, Amazon changed the psychology of consumers," said Fishman. The "marketplace" that shoppers are now heading to is online, and the first store of reference, Amazon. Amazon has built an infrastructure and delivery system to deliver content instantly, and almost anything else within a day of ordering (fortunegreece, 2019).

"It's an ecosystem," Nomura/Instinet retail analyst Simeon Siegel told ABC News. "When Amazon started showing customer reviews, people thought it was crazy. Who cares what customers say? People won't sit down to write reviews, who cares about the random opinion of strangers I've never met?" The above documents the truly innovative nature of the company's thinking and the reason it was established.

Amazon's influence may at first seem limitless. But as Bezos told his employees recently: "Amazon is not too big to fail. In fact, I predict that one day Amazon will fail. If you look at large companies, their life spans tend to be thirty-something years, not a hundred-plus years." Bezos may be right. As the company looks for the next step in its fight for global dominance, it will need to address challenges from both the consumer and regulatory side.

### IV. RESEARCH-AMAZONS CULTURE

As the rapid pace of modern change requires companies to constantly learn and adapt, Amazon can be an important case study, in relation to what has been developed above. Beth Galetti, Amazon's vice president of human resources, has analyzed how all of this led Amazon to develop and support a culture of continuous learning and create the necessary, supportive infrastructure (Mckinsey, 2020).

A culture of empowerment and continuous feedback was achieved according to Beth Galetti. Clients' needs were evolving and diversifying, so continuous learning was imperative for all employees of the company under study. This thought was captured in the leadership principle

(to employees), "Learn and keep being curious." This principle is very important because things have often been done that have never been done before. As there is no learning manual, employees were given the opportunity to try new things and learn along the way.

This philosophy of empowerment is reflected in the fact that every employee is expected to be actively involved. If anyone finds any issues that may be affecting the customer experience or have ideas to improve the situation, they are expected to step in, regardless of whether the issue is in their area of expertise. Awards have even been instituted to recognize and reward this behavior. One has been called 'Just Do It'. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, hands the employee or team responsible for the improvement, a Nike shoe to recognize (in a simple but symbolic way), the recognition of the value of the employees and their ideas, and to strengthen the culture of employee empowerment.

A culture of real-time feedback has also been established. Feedback is shared directly in order to better serve customers. In relation to this, the Connections system was created, a mechanism that asks each employee a question every day when he logs on to his computer. Answers can provide aggregated feedback to the individual manager, while questions cover a wide range of areas, from the work environment to manager effectiveness, team issues, and potential barriers that prevent employees from producing innovative solutions for customer problems.

There is also an annual communication process that has been called "Forte", where the focus is on the most important strengths of the employees. These concepts are specific descriptions of an employee's unique, outstanding capabilities. Forte is a simple process where each employee receives direct feedback from their manager, peers and team members about their strengths and ways to strengthen them.

In the same context, organizational learning starts with employees learning the company's culture, as soon as they start. A program called "Escape

Velocity" has been designed, which is a three-day experience specifically for externally recruited senior executives. As the name suggests, the program aims to help executives shed "previous burdens" and enter new ways of thinking at Amazon. The program focuses on setting expectations and explaining the culture.

Leaders teach potentials leaders the mindsets and skills considered successful (the theory of the organization), such as changing the perspective from focusing on competition, to obsessing over customer needs, from relying on PowerPoint to more "deep/impactful" » narratives and from the emphasis on cost reduction or quarterly results, to doing the right things over time. For continuous, internal learning, there is an internal wiki site that contains a range of information and facts about the company. At the same time, a video production mechanism has been created, where employees can learn from the experiences of other employees (knowledge base - a number of necessary skills are learned).

## V. ANALYSIS

Learning within organizations is not a static but a constantly changing process. It has been argued in the literature that a firm achieves competitive advantage through organizational learning. Empirical evidence has shown that the business environment is becoming increasingly competitive, with large companies tending to get bigger and smaller ones trying to catch up. Competition has become even more intense in the online retail sector. Since the Internet has become widely available, consumers have become more sophisticated and demanding, choosing to shop online both to access a vast variety of goods and for convenience (Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2019).

A leading organization (in terms of performance) is Amazon, having achieved excellent innovations and very good levels of customer service. This organization has revolutionized e-commerce by providing a range of service offerings ranging from entertainment media, grocery delivery to web cloud services (Seeking alpha, 2012). Amazon was driven by the popular strategy of achieving

competitive advantage, cost leadership, in building a culture of active learning, development and breaking new boundaries (Boss, 2017).

Realizing competitive advantage needs much more than reducing operating costs, of course. It may ultimately be about the ability to adapt to changing market needs (Boss, 2017). A business that wishes to remain profitable in the long term must be able to understand the purchasing behavior, attitudes/perceptions, needs and strategies of customers. Amazon rose to prominence by creating a one-stop shop for all online retailers. Despite this, Amazon managed to reduce its costs while enjoying a competitive advantage (Dudovskiy, 2020). The company managed to optimize the possibilities of achieving economies of scale, positively modify its business operations and enhance its organizational flexibility in different market sectors (Dudovskiy, 2020).

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The concept of organizational learning is extremely deep and complex. It mainly concerns the organizational culture, as was seen in the case of Amazon. The continuous development of knowledge was shown by the simplest thing - the existence of a "just do it" award. It may seem like something simple, but being awarded by the founder of the company is not something simple. In fact, it signals, in practice, the organization's values. A learning culture can be more complex than the everyday tasks of leadership. In any case, the company under study appeared to be an organization that deeply values (at every level) the spirit of inquiry, questioning and work participation. Organizations can learn valuable lessons from this mindset. Also, it may be important to signal these dimensions of culture in recruitment activities.

The point is to initially attract like-minded people, select those who fit the position/skill level, and then do the formal learning of the culture. Recruiting and selecting unsuitable people does not help in the future. In the same context, it can be argued that an important parameter of knowledge development (transfer and utilization)

is the strong ties between employees. One way (among others) to achieve this is to continuously integrate people who are already positively aligned with an organization's core values.

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