

**THIRD EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON
ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE, AND CAPABILITIES
LEARNING ORIENTATIONS IN RELATIONAL
LEARNING**

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LEARNING ORIENTATIONS IN RELATIONAL LEARNING. (*)

Abstract. A loyal customer is who maintains collaboration relations based on compromise and a mutual trust an organization, renouncing the comparison and concentrating his or her time and other resources in the relation established. Through loyalty of customers, organizations will sure a purchase repetition and recover the investment that has been done to get and maintain customers.

On the other hand, fact such as the coming of new products and substitutive services, the most information and looking for tangible advantages in the relation by customers, explain why, in spite of evident improving in quality of manufactured goods, prices depreciable increase and rhetoric about the need of treating customers well, seven out of ten clients move from one organization to its competitors (Reichheld and Frederick, 1996).

According to Reichheld (1996), loyal customers is not an end by itself, but a way to improve profitability, in the author's opinion the increase of 5 % loyalty rate suppose an increase between 40 and 60 % business performance. Beside of all said, organizations are dedicated their time in indiscriminate hunting of customers instead of learning from their profitable clients.

The aim of this research are; firstly to introduce a theoretical argument of relational learning; secondly some common learning orientations are introduced to capture customers knowledge; and thirdly, we will measure the relative importance and significative of these orientations in loyalty of customers.

The research is structured in four parts; in the first, a theoretical perspective is introduced to show us a reference point about relational learning; in the second part, customer communication, service quality and customer relationship are explained like the clue learning orientations to enlarge customer loyalty; in the third part, four indexes will be used to measure the relative importance of each one for this aim we will use the technology and information systems sector from Murcia Spain; finally, in the four part conclusions and results will be showed, and some aspects about relational learning will be introduced.

Keywords. Relational learning, customer loyalty, customer communication, service quality, customer relationship.

Interest in this topic. In Spain, Small and Medium Sized enterprises (SMEs) are the 99.8% of the companies. With the support of the Spanish and the European Governments, we are involved in a project which aim is to help PYME's to improve its performance through the management knowledge and the use or information technology tools.

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INTRODUCTION.

A loyal customer is who maintains collaborative relations based on a compromise and a mutual trust with an organization, renouncing the comparison and concentrating his or her time and other resources in the relation established. Through customers loyalty, organizations will sure a purchase repetition and recover the investment that has been done to get and maintain customers.

On the other hand, fact such as the coming of new products and substitutive services, the greatest information and search of tangible advantages in the relation by customers explain why in spite of evident improving in quality of manufactured goods, prices depreciable increase and the incessant rhetoric about the need of a right customers treatment, seven out of ten clients move from one organization to its competitors (Reichheld and Frederick, 1996).

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The aims of this research are; firstly to introduce a theoretical argument of relational learning; secondly four common learning orientations to capture customers knowledge are introduced to learn from customers; and thirdly, we will measure the relative importance and significative of these orientations in relational learning process.

In this mission, the research is structured in four parts; firstly, a theoretical perspective is introduced to show us a reference point about relational learning; secondly, a relational learning process is explained like the clue to enlarge customer loyalty; thirdly, four indexes will be used to measure the relative importance of learning orientations (personal satisfaction, service quality, customer communication and customer relationship) in every phase of the relational learning process, for this aim we will use the technology and

information systems sector from Murcia Spain; finally, conclusions and results will be shown, and some aspects about relational learning will be introduced.

RELATIONAL CAPITAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE.

About former studies in Relational Capital, the revision of relative literature on intellectual capital allows us identify multiple researches which refer to this question. One of the first models of measurement and management that is going beyond of financial indicators, it is the Scorecard Balance (Kaplan and Norton, 1992), that considers, in a perspective much more closed the relationships of the organizations with customers in what they named a perspective of clients, in this block some aims are marked to get them. In this way, focus in clients is referred by Edvinsson and Malone (1997) in 'Navigator of Skandia' as indicators to representative the actual situation of the company. Bontis (1996) speaks of clients capital and defines it as "the knowledge of distributions channels and relationships with clients". Brooking (1996) is another author interested in the relationships of the company with clients, but with vision beyond them, this consultant named market assets as "those which are derived from a beneficial relationship of the company with market and customers", including product brands, prestige, distribution channels, image and name of the company, and other types of contracts that give competitive advantage to the company.

In the same line that Brooking (1996), Roos and Roos (1997) extend the study of company relationships with clients, and this category of intellectual capital is designated as clients and relationships capital, including in this block at the same time other intellectual capital as: relationships with suppliers, relationships with partners and relationships with investors. It must be mentioned Sveiby (1997) contributions, who in his "external structure" included relationships with clients and suppliers, commercial brands and reputation or image of the company, using for this, three types of indicators: Growing and innovation, efficiency and stability indicators. About former considerations, "Relational Capital" is defined as the value of relationships that an organisation maintains with the environment (Euroforum, 1998). However, among all the

agents which a company has relationships, the most important are customers, because of the direct relation with financial performance and survival in a long term (Bueno, 1998). In this way, according with Onge (1996), Customer capital is the value of relationship that an organization maintains with its customers.

To get Customer capital, it is necessary the knowledge of clients. For this reason, in the following epigraph, a relational learning model will be presented, which every level of learning (individual, group, and organizational) will be studied, changing information and beginning by explicit knowledge of customer, distributed and used to create Customer Capital.

RELATIONAL LEARNING PROCESS.

From the relational learning point of view, human factor is the key, and organization learning from these customers basically changing information with them (García et al., 1999), and are precisely commercials who have direct contact with customers. However, the information given by the customer is one thing and the knowledge used by the company is other thing.

On the other hand, and since many of the knowledge of the individuals are of tacit character, it is necessary to impel its conversion to explicit knowledge increasing its formality; in this way, so that the individual knowledge is converted into an organizational knowledge it is required certain mechanisms on knowledge service that help to create, combine, group and integrate the knowledge that they proceed of the different individual that live together in the organization, and conversely, the combination and knowledge distribution throughout the net.

Having in mind these considerations, graphic 1 represents the relational learning process, through the one which the organization transforms the tacit and explicit knowledge of the client into customer capital. It is considered a process structured in four phases (customer selection, acquisition, transformation and utilization of the knowledge).

The first phase, "*customer selection*" represents a previous step to apply the process itself, it is due to a strategy process in the company, where after differing, identifying and classifying all the customers, It is established who of

the customers are interested for the company. To establish indiscriminate relationship with every customer is not profitable, for that organizations that tried to be everything for everybody finished being nothing for nobody (Morgan y Hunt, 1994; Peppers y Rogers, 1999; Day, 1999; Kaplan y Norton, 2000; Alfaro, 2000). For these reasons, the previous phase in learning process will be to choose those initial customers to learn.

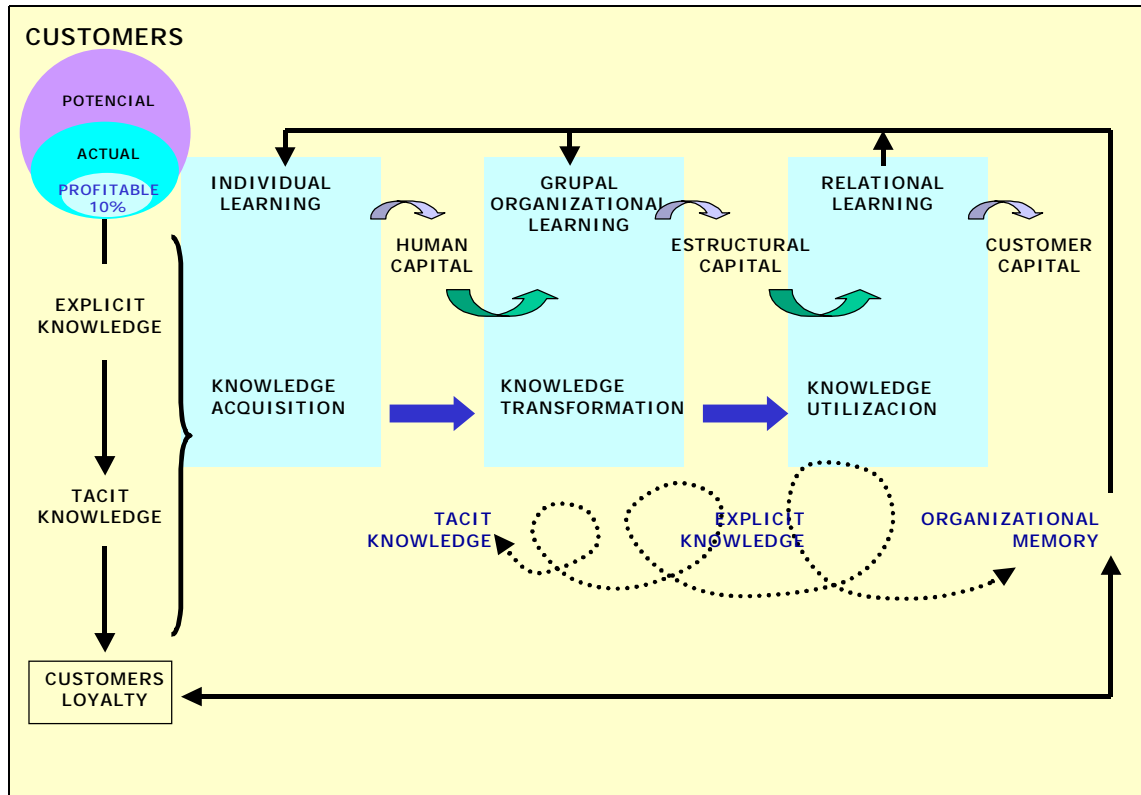
The second phase, "acquisition" represents the individual learning level, it is this level, the key to get knowledge, the commercial personnel in touch with the clients departing of an information exchange, and beginning by a literal utilization of the explicit knowledge of the client, all this know-how is internalized by the individual and materializes it in the form of experiences and mental models, furthermore, this knowledge internalized by the individual in the form of tacit knowledge, will represent an important part of the human capital of the organization. However, the organization will need that all this individual knowledge will be shared between all the members of the organization, thus starts the third phase of our model.

The group and organizational learning levels represent the third phase, "transfer and transformation capacity" constitutes the process through the one which, the tacit knowledge is converted into explicit. In our learning process, we take for granted that in the process of creation of knowledge, the human knowledge is generated and expanded as consequence of the interaction between the tacit and explicit knowledge. It should be borne in mind, that this conversion is due to a social process between groups and individual. The result of these externalization and combination processes will be the structural capital, in the form of shared explicit knowledge.

On the other hand, the fourth phase will internalize and use the knowledge acquired in the previous phases. The result of such a process will be a tacit knowledge on the clients stored in a shared organizational memory, that it will be used by the members of the organization, beginning a new learning cycle and facilitating the one which in the acquisition and transformation phases it is acquired new learning too, this new knowledge is included in the learning

process as “Customer Capital” (Gronroos, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Fahey and Prusak, 1998; March, 1991; McGill and Slocum, 1994).

Graphic 1. Relational Learning Process



Source: Own elaboration

The organizations have a great variety in a way to maximize the learning. The role of the direction in this learning process will be to choose the adequate context that facilitates the acquisition processes, transformation and use of the knowledge. In this way, these elements will represent an intangible assets that will be expressed in beliefs, attitudes and understanding, and defines what is a correct and incorrect behavior, normally it is summarize simply as the way of making the things in an organization. These factors will express that that it is different in an organization; that that it gives an atmosphere, sensation or distinctive climate (Nevis et al., 1995).

The existing literature analyzes the factors that affect to the learning process from multitude of perspectives, since each organization will have its own factors, that will depend on the character of the sector, on the strategic elections taken in the past, of the important events in the inheritance and of the

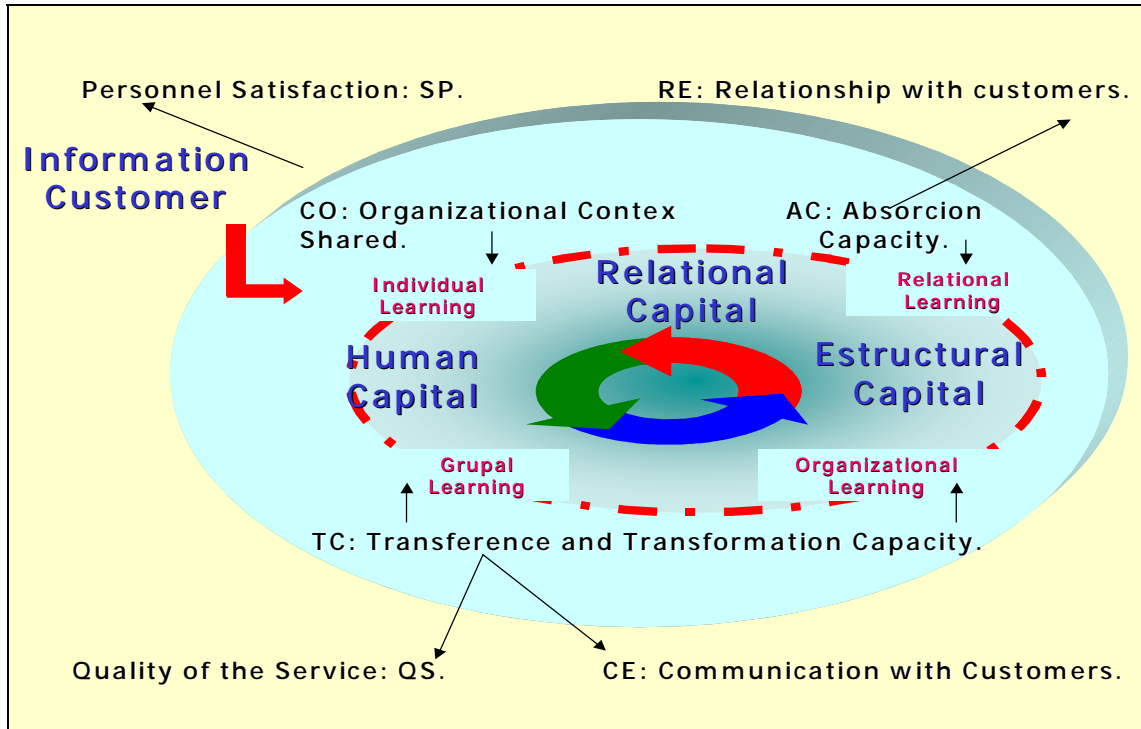
personality and beliefs of the leader or founder (Day, 2000). Nevertheless, our investigation tries to help the organizations to be better in learning systems. According to Day 2000, there is a series of shared factors, that consider to the clients from the perspective of the personnel such as: the lateral communications, the temporary and flexible structures with groups relatively stable.

In order to integrate such ideas, the challenge of this investigation will be achieved an efficient relational learning process, through the selection of those most outstanding elements, as of those which will be possible to analyze which determinant of the process in question can be constituted as key for the success of the relational learning. In a summarized way, graphic 2 represents these factors grouped in a model structured in two blocks, learning orientations and facilitating factors (Nevis et al., 1995).

- The learning facilitator factors (LF), represent the structures, processes and the quality of effective learning (Nevis et al., 1995), they are elements whose presence will facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge of the clients on the part of the organization and its subsequent distribution and use in a shorter period of time. Taking into account the phases of the learning process previously described, the factors that affect to the process of creation, transference and knowledge integration, we can include them in three large concepts: shared organizational context (OC), transference and transformation capacity (TC) and absorptive capacity (AC).
- On the other hand, the learning orientations (LO) are advisers refer to the values and practices that reflect "where" is produced the learning and the "nature" of what is learned (Nevis et al. 1995). These advisers certify the standard that defines a determined organization "learning style". In this sense, they are descriptive factors that help to understand without accomplishing judgements of value. The evolution of these advisers will help the organizations to understand if there are failures in the learning system. In this sense, we base on the considerations of (Day, 2000; Deshpande and Webster, 1989), we

propose four questions that should be answered by the advisers: How to know and understand the clients of the organization? Are the workers of the organization the real attorneys of the clients? Are the clients the final umpires of the organization? Do the clients receive leave of absence in the execution in all the organization?

Graphic 2. Relational learning factors



Source: Own elaboration

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES.

To answer these problems, we can identify four key factors that influence the knowledge transference between an organization and its clients. For this aim, four indexes will be used to measure the relative importance of learning orientations (personal satisfaction, service quality, customer communication and customer relationship) in every phase of the relational learning process.

The first place, "the shared organizational context (OC)", is referred to joint of elements related to the environment provided by the organization, so that can happen the wished vision exchanges and opinions that facilitate the individual learning, considering that the knowledge assimilation in the individual learning implies internal processes to the persons as reflection, intuition, or

interpretation, something which makes indispensable the previous satisfaction existence of the personal, since an organization with difficulty will achieve to satisfy the clients if previously it has not been made with the workers (Fornell, 2000). This consideration makes us to frame the first hypothesis of the work.

H₁ - The personnel satisfaction is in part consequence of the OC provided by the organization.

In second place, "transference and transformation capacity (TC)". This provider fulfils two missions, on one hand, it transforms the tacit individual knowledge into explicit, furthermore, the acquired and distributed knowledge will grant competitive advantages to the organization, only if it is perceived by the clients, since it will allow you achieve a degree of greater differentiation, and this at the same time will help to maintain and widen the clients base (Asubonteng et al., 1996). On the other hand, this phase of the learning process considers that all the relevant knowledge is not always included in the individuals that certify the organization. In this sense, we base on Alfaro (2000) the communication, he provides to the organization a clear reference where the efforts must be aimed to, they are a set of systems and mechanisms through those which is procured to transmit information and at the same time to achieve relevant information on the needs and desires of the involved parts, to interpret them and to act consequently. Under this framework the hypothesis that we propose are:

H₂ - The communication with the client is in part consequence of the TC of the organization.

H₃ - The quality of the service is in part consequence of the TC of the organization.

Finally, the necessary elements have been considered so that the organization internalize the knowledge and reset in a context and adapt at its own operations, in the concept of "absorptive capacity (AC)"; the absorptive

capacity is referred to the cultural factors that guarantee the absorption and knowledge utilization on the part of the individuals particularly and of the organization as extension of the same. In this way, to adapt, especially implicit knowledge of the client, to the operation of the organization, it is required time (Alfaro, 2000:132), factor that it is provided through a confidence relationship continued with the client (Day, 2000:61). This aspect also is collected in our investigation in the fourth hypothesis of the work:

H₄ - The relationship to the clients is in part consequence of the AC of the organization.

METHODOLOGIC.

In order to contrast the four hypotheses was considered the population of the companies of the Technologies and Information Systems sector of the Region of Murcia. The information collecting period lasted about a month and a half, from early June to mid July 2001. The information collecting was effected through a personal survey to the manager or general director of the PYME that had to indicate his degree of agreement or disagreement on a scale Likert of seven points (1= strong disagreement and 7= strong agreement). In table 1 and 2 are collected a summary of these elements.

On the other hand, in the questionnaire, we asked manager to answer the questions from the perspective of the personnel, and others he should do it from, a global vision of the company, during the survey was also encouraged him to say his vision on the issues of the questionnaire.

In table 1 are represented the articles used to measure the independent variables (shared organizational context "OC", transference and transformation capacity "TC" and absorptive capacity "AC"), and in table 2, they are collected the items used to measure the dependent variables (personnel satisfaction "PS", quality of service "QS", communication "CE" and relationship to clients "RE").

TABLE 1. Summary of survey independent variables items

SHARED ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT	OC
The workers are well-informed of the objectives and of the results of their department	OC_1
The workers participate in the definition of the content of the posts and the form of accomplishing the processes	OC_2
The workers can take decisions without asking their superior when they are with unforeseen affairs within their performance area	OC_3
The workers provide creative solutions before unforeseen affairs	OC_4
The workers put at the disposal of the company all the information that they possess	OC_5
The workers are incentivated to identify and solve problems	OC_6
The workers do not conceal their/ mistakes	OC_7
TRANSFERENCE AND TRANSFORMATION CAPACITY	TC
They can discuss with freedom with their superior the difficulties and matters related to their work	TC_1
The directors know the internal mistakes existence by their clients and not by their workers (i)	TC_2
The management accepts the change introducing it actively in the company	TC_3
The management has ability to work in team	TC_4
Management has trend to collaborate with members of the organization and to solve problems together	TC_5
The company complies with the degree of introduction of new technologies	TC_6
The workers of the company do not get scared before the problems but face them and solve them	TC_7
ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY	AC
The useful knowledge for the decision-making is available in manual of procedures or data bases or intranet	AC_1
It is collected external information in a systematical and regular way	AC_2
Operative decisions delegation	AC_3
They are organized meetings, presentations,... for the relevant information distribution	AC_4
The new techniques or methods, before their general application, are experienced in units of the organization	AC_5
Projects initiation and introduction of novelties	AC_6
Number of activities in those which the company operates	AC_7
Cooperation agreements with other companies	AC_8
Subcontracts of activities to other companies	AC_9

Source: Own elaboration.

TABLE 2. Summary of survey dependent variables items

SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT OF THE PERSONNEL	PS
Absenteeism	PS_1
Voluntary abandonments	PS_2
Productivity of labor	PS_3
Identification of the workers with the values and the objectives of the company	PS_4
Enthusiasm and implication of workers in the work station	PS_5
QUALITY OF SERVICE	QS
Increase of market quota	QS_1
Improvement of the quality	QS_2
Satisfaction of the clients	QS_3
Good reputation and prestige	QS_4
Its market quota	QS_5
Its prices	QS_6
COMMUNICATION	CE
What it is learned from the advances and mistakes in certain areas is communicated to the other areas	CE_1
They participate frequently in social acts, (formal and/or informal)	CE_2
They have communicative abilities with the others	CE_3
They have abilities to lead persons teams and to motivate them to work in an efficient way	CE_4
Your company has several applicable solutions to face with the changes	CE_5
Your company answers very quickly to the increases or decreases in demand of its product or service	CE_6
Your company answers very quickly to the new needs or conditions of its clients	CE_7
Your company answers very quickly to the appearance of new market segments	CE_8
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CLIENTS	RC
You maintain frequently work meetings with clients	RC_1
You maintain frequently collaboration with clients to accomplish and/or to improve the products and services	RC_2
You accomplish activities (dinners, seminars, trips) where participate your workers and clients	RC_3

Source: Own elaboration.

Previously to the accomplishment of the personal survey, a presentation letter was sent by e-mail and by conventional mail where the companies were

informed of the next visit of the pollsters and of the work objective, they were assured its strictly scientific and confidential character as well as the global and anonymous treatment of the data.

Finally, on a population of 253 companies, the effected surveys total was of 151 what supposes a response rate of the 59.7%. The size of the sample was considered sufficient, since it is superior to ten times the number of predictors (Basclay et al., 1995).

RESULTS.

The statistic results of this study were based on the recommendations of the methodology developed by Bontis (1998). in the first place, it was accomplished the test of alpha of Cronbach, with the purpose of evaluating the relativity of the measures used in the suggested scale. The alpha of Cronbach can be considered an adequate index of the Inter item consistence, as well as the relative consistence of the dependent and independent variables (Sekaran, 1992). According to Hair et al. (1999) the values of this test should have minimal acceptance values between 0.6 and 0.7, or greater to 0.7. In our case, such as it is collected in table 3, the values of the alpha of Cronbach, they were significantly greater of the threshold of 0.6 unless for the satisfaction of the personnel that it was of 0.5720, the rest of variables were presenting values between 0.6145 for the (TC) to 0.6769 for the (RC), justifying their combination into a single scale to test the hypothesis.

TABLE 3. Cronbach´s alpha test for reliability

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	Cronbach's Alpha	DEPENDENT VARIABLES	Cronbach's Alpha
Shared Organizational Context	0.6365	Personnel satisfaction	0.5720
Transference and		Quality of Service	0.6369
Transformation Capacity	0.6145	Communication	0.6165
Absorptive Capacity	0.6212	Relationship with the Clients	0.6769

Source: Own elaboration.

The confirmation statistics of the hypothesis, it has been accomplished using the statistical technique of regression analysis, this decision is found justified, due to the quantitative nature of the dependent and independent

variables. Within this technique was opted for the hierarchic method that permits to introduce the independent variables in different blocks. Through these equations, it is studied the degree of explanation of the variance in the dependent variables, for this, they were designed the standardized coefficients of the independent variables. On the other hand, for the contrast of each hypothesis was considered only those cases that had answered to all the referring questions to the independent and dependent variables introduced in the hierarchic regressions (valid questionnaires).

For the regressions were included as dependent variables personnel satisfaction, communication, quality of service and relationship. On the other hand, as independent variables, they were considered the shared organizational context, the transference and transformation capacity and the absorptive capacity. The design of the models considered for the contrast of the hypothesis in the sector is exposed below.

- In the first hypothesis to study the effect of the OC, TC, and AC in the satisfaction of the personnel (SP) it has been designed two types of hierarchic linear regressions. In both, the most explanatory variables are introduced in the model 1 and stay in all the regressions. On the other hand, the regressions defer in the introduced independent variables: the regression 1 introduces as independent variables solely to the TC while the regression 2 incorporates into the OC.
- For the contrast of the second and third hypothesis, were designed two types of hierarchic linear regressions. In both the variable TC was maintained constant, nevertheless, in the regression of the second hypothesis were introduced the OC, while in that of the third hypothesis was made the own with the AC.
- To finish, to contrast the fourth hypothesis it was made a model where the dependent variable was the relationship to clients, while the independent variable was the AC.

Table 4 shows the results of contrasting, as the independent variables OC and TC were influencing the SP. They show that though initially the model

considered solely the TC beta coefficient 0.463 ($p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 21.4\%$), the explanation of the variance of the independent variable SP, improved upon considering jointly the TC and the OC, the variable two jointly were explaining the ($R^2 = 24.8\%$) of the SP, resulting some beta coefficients for the TC from 0.328 ($p < 0.01$) and from 0.225 ($p < 0.05$) for the OC. In this sense can be asserted that the transfer and transformation capacity by and large with the shared organizational context that provides the organization, they are good predictors of the satisfaction of the personnel.

In the second hypothesis, it was contrasted as the independent variables OC and TC were influencing the QS, the same as for the previous case, they were obtained the coefficients standardized for the independent variables, it was significantly statistic with respect to the variable QS. It was observed, that the TC was explaining the ($R^2 = 14.6\%$) of the QS. On the other hand, the OC, though it did not result significantly statistic, also had a positive influence on the QS. In this sense, we can assert that transformation capacity of the organization is a good predictor of the quality of service perceived by the clients and that the elements that facilitate the information acquisition also have a positive influence in this.

With respect to how the TC and AC influence the communication. The model considered initially the TC with the beta coefficient 0.531 ($p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 26.7\%$), nevertheless, the explanation of the variance of the independent variable CE improved upon considering jointly the TC and the AC, the two variables jointly were explaining the ($R^2 = 30.2\%$) of the CE, resulting some beta coefficients for the TC from 0.460 ($p < 0.01$) and from 0.137 ($p < 0.1$) for the AC. In this sense can be asserted that the transference and transformation capacity by and large with the capacity of absorbing that provides the organization, they are good predictors of the communication.

The fourth hypothesis that was studying the relationship to the clients with respect to the absorptive capacity of the organization, showed that the AC with a significantly statistic beta coefficient of 0.354 shows the influence between the relationship to the clients and the factors put at the disposal of the creation and conservation of the organizational memory.

TABLE 4. Path coefficients

		Beta coefficient				
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	OC	TC	AC	N	Average R ² for model	
DEPENDENT VARIABLES						
Personnel satisfaction	0.225 **	0.328 ***	No	145	24.8 %	
Quality service	0.016	0.371 ***	No	143	14.6 %	
Communication	No	0.460 ***	0.137 *	146	30.2%	
Relationship with customers	No	No	0.354 ***	145	10%	

Notes: * significant at $p < 0.10$; ** significant at $p < 0.05$; *** significant at $p < 0.01$. No used → Not

DISCUSSION.

Any organization that wish to learn from its clients must understand thoroughly which are the sources of value for its clients. Nevertheless, the response to this issue is complex, since the differential values that the clients perceive of the organization are intangible and heterogeneous elements, and furthermore, the management of these elements will be different, depending on the type on business, on the structure and on the strategy on the organization. (Kaplan and Norton, 1992; Edvinsson, 1996; Sveiby, 1997; Brooking, 1996).

Nevertheless, this investigation has accomplished a general analysis that permits us to advance in the relational learning and the customer capital. Perhaps the most important contribution of this paper is consider different variable for each phase of the learning process.

The results of the study, support the hypothesis 1, which implies, a positive relationship between the facilitator factors (shared organizational context and transparency capacity) and the learning orientator (satisfaction of the personnel). This means, that the satisfaction of the personnel is in part consequence of the individual and organizational learning.

On the other hand, the results also support the hypothesis 2 and 3, this implies, a positive influence between the facilitator factor (transformation capacity) and the learning orientator (quality of service and communication with clients). In other words, this confirms that the structural capital is in part consequence of the organizational learning.

Furthermore, the results related to the fourth hypothesis show a relationship between the facilitator factor (absorptive capacity) and the orientator (relationship to clients). The "absorptive capacity" in this context is improved also through the repetition and practice, and it is reflected in the forms relatively stable with those which the groups or organizations see and are behaved in the attainment of their objective.

In our opinion, these four learning orientations need to be used to retain the clients. Future investigations can demonstrate that these relationships can be generalized to other, countries and industries. The following phase of this investigation will be carried out studies with this methodology in other sectors.

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