

In Pursuit of Ambidextrous Organization – Using knowledge sharing and organizational learning to bridge over structural and contextual ambidexterity

Key words: ambidexterity, knowledge, organizational learning, innovation

Abstract:

Underlying organizational learning there is a tension emanates when the firm tries to nurture the capability of exploration and exploitation (March 1991). Yet, the trade-offs to balance this tension are difficult and most often tilted toward exploitation where the power is granted (ibid). The idea of ambidexterity (Duncan, 1976; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996) suggests that one way to achieve this balance is to differentiate the part of the firm that pursues exploration from the part that undertakes exploitation(seeFigure 1). At the heart of shaping an ambidextrous organization is a challenge of mutual exclusivity, which we believe can be bridged. In this article, we begin by critically reviewing previous research and the paradox of the concept of ambidexterity. We then offer a new model by integrating separated subunits into a unitary one for bridging over the gap between structural and contextual ambidexterity.

Despite the increasing interest in ambidexterity as a concept, an examination of the literature indicates that several important research issues remain unexplored, ambiguous, or conceptually vague. Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) categorize two types of ambidexterity: 'structural ambidexterity' is achieved by separate the structural division of exploitative and exploratory tasks; and 'contextual ambidexterity' is achieved through the cultural values and norms of the organizational context.

However, a problematic scenario arises due to the imbalanced power between the two divisions. When an organization favors the side of exploration,the relative accumulations of knowledge can determine a dominant power to the exploratory subunits. This does not only lead to the path-dependence of knowledge (Carlile and Reberich, 2003) but also further strengthen the dominant logic (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986). Empirical studies have shown that the reusing of path-dependent knowledge tends to constrain the capacity of others to represent the novelty they are facing (Carlile, 2004; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2008), this in turn, will affect the dynamic knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994) between the heterogeneous subunits within the organization.

One distinctive limitation in the ambidexterity model is that knowledge creation requires the integration of new and existing knowledge that cannot be separated (Tsoukas, 1996; Carlile, 2004; Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). The differentiation consequently creates an impermeable boundary between exploitative and exploratory divisions in the perspectives of different subcultures and social identity (e.g. Orr 1990; Carlile, 2004; Alvessonand Sveningsson, 2008; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Although we agree that there is a need to detach these two parts in order to have the explorative functions gain momentum from a creative and innovativeorganizational culture, we argue it may become a barrier to knowledge creation, more importantit comes at a cost with a blocked channel of organizational learning between the exclusive subunits.

March and Simon (1958:188) stressed the importance of 'borrowing' rather than 'inventing' for innovative pursuits. The co-existence of explorative and exploitative functions suggested in the new model (see Figure 2) builds a broader knowledge base that would potentially bring additional external connections between the two

functions. By merging the two previously separated functions that have fundamentally different skill-sets, we believe that the organization can broaden its absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

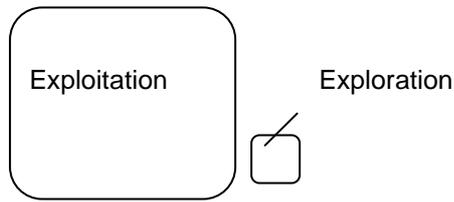


Figure 1 – Traditional ambidextrous organization

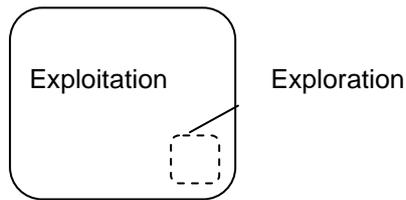


Figure 2 – Learning ambidextrous organization

Another typical challenge as stressed earlier is path dependence (Nelson and Winter, 1982). The historical ‘path’ creates a pattern upon which future knowledge search is based on. Through the proposed change in organizational structure there is a potential of tackling the issue through the existence of two ‘paths’ of the organization rather than one.

To sum up, we suggest that when the explorative division of the organization has gained its recognition and legitimacy it can be integrated with the exploitative organization. It is important to point out that the united organization is neither a contextually- nor a structural ambidextrous organization, but a natural progression of a mature structural ambidextrous organization that wants to gain further success through organizational learning between the earlier mutually exclusive functions.

We believe that the proposed model is a step in the direction of shaping an ambidextrous organization through the attempts of learning and knowledge sharing. There are many issues that need to be addressed to ensure success in the transition, specifically on the perspective of strategic human resources management. Thus, we suggest further empirical research to this initial conceptual model of a learning ambidextrous organization.

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