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Structural modeling approach to the strategic learning process in acquisition context

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ABSTRACT

To have a good response from environmental changes and a long-term guide to move from present to future, organizations need to focus on feedback from their actions and use them effectively in modifying their strategies. The process of strategic learning can help organizations to continue expanding their capacity and have a flexible strategy to create the truly desired results. This study aims to explore the phenomenon of strategic learning for a better understanding of the concept of the acquisition learning process. A structural modeling approach has been developed to examine the relationship between the key constructs of strategic learning in the acquisition context.

A questionnaire was sent electronically to 212 companies in the UK that have experience in acquisition. The collected data were analyzed using LISREL as a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) software. The results of this study show that lessons learned from past acquisitions, and the media for transferring these lessons, are the main factors that have effects on strategic learning in an acquisition context.

Keywords: Strategic management; learning; acquisition; knowledge management; sense making; structural equation modelling.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy is an inseparable part of an organization. It is about moving from here to there. Organizations should be sure from where they start. However, much less certain is the desirability of their destinations. The world is changing and the destination may change from this point to another point. Therefore, they should continuously review their strategies, a actions and modify them to reach their new destination (Pascale 1996). Strategic learning is a link between knowledge management and sense making. It is a process of making sense of the environment, identifying complex and ambiguous issues, and resolving these

issues by applying strategically useful knowledge. Strategic managers require intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing the knowledge in organization (Ozorhon *et al.* 2005). The knowledge management approach refers to strategic learning as a process of identifying the strategically useful knowledge to gain organizational competence. The emphasis in this approach is on strategic forms of learning and knowledge management which can improve the performance of firms in competition, and how knowledge and learning can improve the strategic management of organizations (Sanchez & Heene 1997).

As knowledge becomes a source of competitive advantage, knowledge management has become critical for success in organization (Ozorhon *et al.* 2005). To gain organizational competence, it is required that organizations be able to identify the strategically useful knowledge and recognize some basic differences in the contents of their stock of knowledge. Lampel (1998) believes through the process of strategic learning, organizations try not only "to move knowledge from one part of the organization to another," but they should also "look outside their own boundaries for knowledge." Walker (1998) describes knowledge management as the process of taking better advantage of a company's data to enable corporations to react more quickly and more decisively to problems and their competitors. These two approaches of strategic learning were considered in this research.

ACQUISITION LEARNING

The merger of separate entities into a new firm or the acquisition of one firm by another have both become a regular component of managerial task (Marks & Mirvis 2001). Johnson & Scholes (1999) define acquisition as where an organization develops its resources and competences by taking over another organization. This event is usually executed in one of three ways: the acquisition of shares, the acquisition of the target enterprise's property components, and the acquisition of the entire enterprise (Kozaczuk 1998).

An integration is a ripe opportunity for organizational learning and allows for an opportunity to gain insight from experience (Marks & Mirvis 2001). When learning organizations engage in integrating, they examine their strategy in relation to what is learned and incorporate new learning into their current and future circumstances (Chen 2005). Acquisition as an integration and appropriate strategic issue has been chosen in this study for a number of reasons. First, the merger-acquisition process is a natural part of the business life cycle that may determine whether a company survives or has growth (Rowe *et al.* 1994, McDonald *et al.* 2005). Second, acquisition is a repeatable event that may occur many times in an organization's history (Haleblian & Finkelstein 1999). Therefore, prior acquisition experience may be used for a subsequent

acquisition and exploitation of existing data and exploration for new knowledge (March 1991) from previous acquisitions allow organizations to learn how to handle new acquisitions (Vermeulen & Barkema 2001). Third, unlike other organizational actions, acquisitions are discrete and distinct events and the performance of an acquisition can be assessed by using common methods to assess event performance within the finance and strategic management literatures (Haleblian & Finkelstein 1999).

Knowledge Acquisition: The quality of strategic decisions highly depends on acquiring knowledge through the company's own experience, other companies experiences and external resources (Ozorhon *et al.* 2005). To collect data that has a direct link to the selected strategy and turn it into new knowledge is a potential source of strategic learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). The first question asks respondents about the type of knowledge that has been collected to acquire another company. Knowledge collected includes: knowledge about their organization's situation, knowledge about their organization's relationship to its environment, knowledge about the acquired company, and/or other types of knowledge.

The second question focuses on methods and procedures used for knowledge gathering. Who has collected this knowledge? This includes: external professionals, internal organizational members (Kuwada 1998) and/or communities of experts from within and outside the organization to guide knowledge acquisition. Although Ozorhon *et al.* (2005) believe companies mostly learn from their own experiences, Thomas *et al.* (2001) stress the use of external experts to reduce interpretative bias. Marks & Mirvis (1992) suggest using both internal specialists and external experts. Outside experts bring know-how and objectivity, while internal professionals are familiar with their company.

Knowledge Transferees: Since individuals are the creators of knowledge, knowledge management partly addresses the question of how knowledge is transferred from individuals to groups and organizations (Nonaka 1991). Marks & Mirvis (2001) state that lessons learned by one manager or group through the combination process can be extracted and disseminated to others in the organization. Organizations should therefore create mechanisms and systems to use and manage their existing knowledge and achieve the highest strategic benefit (Sanchez & Heene 1998). Knowledge can be transferred through dialogues, reports, and computerized communication networks. The application of e-mail, intranet, bulletin board, and newsgroup can support the distribution of knowledge throughout the organization and allows organizational members to debate, discuss, and interpret information through multiple perspectives (Bhatt 2001).

The next question is which of the following means have been used to transfer these lessons: building knowledge into decision support tools, intranet, formal report, seminar or meeting, informal communication, and/or other means.

Knowledge Shares: Although knowledge is proposed as the most important resource for competitive advantage, it is not just knowledge *per se* that is important, but rather the integration and sharing of a member's knowledge play a vital role in the process of learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Knowledge needs to be distributed and shared throughout the organization (Bhatt 2001). Thomas, Sussman & Henderson (2001) believe an organization's ability to generate, store, and transport this knowledge across levels of an organization is a characteristic of strategic learning. Individual knowledge is always at risk of being lost (Ozorhon *et al.* 2005). This tacit knowledge is hidden in the head of an organizations members. To enhance learning in the organization, more of this knowledge should be stored explicitly, so that other members of the organization can access this knowledge (Nonaka 1991). Respondents were asked to whom of the following persons the knowledge has been shared to use in the next situations this include decision makers responsible for future decisions, and/or a functional department or all members of the company.

Knowledge Utilization: The consequence of strategic action is the response of environment to that action and needs interpretation. Interpreting the consequences enables others to make sense out of and get lessons from that strategic action. Providing meaningful interpretations for information by top managers is often seen as critical to the success and even the survival of organizations. Learning in an organization occurs when individuals share success and failure stories (Ozorhon *et al.* 2005). Respondents were asked about the lessons their company has learned from this acquisition that can be used in future decision-making situations. Answers were to overcome problems, to handle a new acquisition, to adapt to varying circumstances, to work with new approaches, and/or to set up a new strategy.

METHODOLOGY

A Literature search and pilot study helped to formulate the problem for more precise investigation, increasing familiarity with the problem and collecting information about a set of criteria and factors that could be involved in strategic learning in the context of acquisition. This stage helped to determine that the type of knowledge, knowledge gatherer, lessons learned, people shared and means for knowledge transferring are some basic constructs of strategic learning in the process of acquisition. Aquestionnaire survey was adopted to illustrate organizational practices and processes that contribute to strategic learning. How do organizations acquire, interpret, and use knowledge? How do they generate, store, and transport lessons learned across levels of an organization?

Email was used in this study to send/receive, complete and return the questionnaire. Sproull (1986) notes that as using electronic mail systems becomes more common in organizations, it may become an appropriate medium for collecting data from organization members. In particular, this kind of survey is also commonly used for the questioning of experts on a specific topic (Naether 1996).

Respondents were senior managers or other decision-makers in organizations responsible for acquisition deals. A five-point scale was used to design the questionnaire. The end points were extremely high' and 'extremely low.' Respondents were instructed to express their strength of attitude toward each item by writing a number between 1 and 5 in front of each item. This questionnaire helped to collect data from the sample in order to develop the model. The survey items are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey tems

Factors	Criteria
Type of Knowledge	Data about the organization's situation Data about the organization's relationship to its environment Data about target
Knowledge Gatherer	Internal specialists External experts A multi-disciplinary team
Lessons Learned	Overcome problems Handle a new acquisition Adapt to varying circumstances Work with new approaches Set up a new strategy
People Shared	Decision makers responsible for future decisions A functional department All members of the company
Transferring Means	Building knowledge into decision support tools / Intranet Formal report Seminars/meetings Informal communication

DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was sent through email to a population of 212 companies which undertaken acquisition (n = 212) and 56 companies responded to the questionnaire. The *response rate* to the questionnaire was (=26%) more than the minimum recommended level of 20% for organizational surveys (Grover 1997).

As a test of *non-response bias*, Wallace and Mellor (1988) suggest to compare the mean responses of one or more variables given by certain size of respondents of the last period with those of early periods. In this study means and correlations of the responses received in the first week were compared to those received in the last week. There was no difference. It means to make generalizations from samples to the larger population is possible.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients of each criterion

	Criteria	Item Total Correlation Coefficient
1	Knowledge about the organization's situation	0.35
2	Knowledge about the organization's relationship to its environment	0.57
3	Knowledge about target	0.74
4	Internal specialists	0.48
5	External experts	0.05
6	A multi-disciplinary team	0.72
7	Overcome problems	0.67
8	Handle a new acquisition	0.86
9	Adapt to varying circumstances	0.82
10	Work with new approaches	0.94
11	Set up a new strategy	0.64
12	Decision makers responsible for future decisions	0.99
13	A functional department	0.72
14	All members of the company	0.43
15	Decision support tools/ Intranet	0.46
16	Formal report	0.29
17	Seminars/meetings	0.72
18	Informal communication	0.57

Internal consistency reliability was used for considering the reliability of scale. In the scale development procedure, the main concern was correlations among criteria. To investigate this, correlation coefficients were calculated. Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients of each criterion.

Cronbach Alpha analysis is carried out to measure intra-scale *reliability*. The

overall estimated reliability is 0.85. This means that 85% of the variability in obtained scores could be said to represent the true individual differences, and 15% of the variability is due to random error. This is identified as being a high measure of reliability. Nunnally (1978), for example, recommends a Cronbach Alpha score of 0.7 and above as giving a reasonable measure of intra-scale reliability.

The *validity* of a scale is the extent to which it measures the construct that it is designed to measure. Reliability does not necessarily imply validity. Validity refers to whether a measure actually measures what it claims to measure (Aron and Aron 1999). According to Bryant (2000), "validity concerns whether a particular inference or conclusion that one wishes to make is accurate, reasonable, or correct."

There are three types of validity: content (factorial) validity, construct (discriminant) validity, and criterion validity.

Content validity concerns the degree to which a measurement scale assesses all relevant aspects of the conceptual domain that it is intended to measure. This type of validity can be evaluated using multivariate statistical procedures, such as exploratory factor analysis (Bryant 2000).

Construct validity concerns whether a given measure actually assesses the underlying variable, or construct, that the measure is intended to represent. It also determines the extent to which the measure appears to comply with the theoretical implications of the topic being measured. A form of construct validity in the social sciences is discriminant validity. This refers to the degree to which multiple measures of different concepts are distinct. Researchers have also relied on factor analysis for evaluating discriminant validity.

Criterion validity concerns how accurately an instrument predicts a well-accepted indicator of a given concept, or a criterion. A multivariate approach to assessing criterion validity is structural equation modeling (SEM) (Byrne 1998).

The validity of a measurement scale concerns how thoroughly (content validity) and accurately (construct validity) it measures a theoretical concept of interest. In this study, strategic learning is a specific theoretical concept of interest. It also concerns how useful it is in predicting important outcomes (criterion validity) (Bryant 2000).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is considered a generalization of regression analysis, factor analysis or other multivariate analysis methods. Byrne (1998) points out SEM is a statistical methodology that takes a confirmatory, rather than exploratory approach to the multivariate data

analysis. In SEM, the assumed underlying factors are represented as latent variables and the aim of SEM is to estimate the strength of the associations between the latent variables and between the observed variables and the latent variables. SEM merges a variety of statistical procedures: factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, multiple regression analysis, path analysis and measurement modeling.

SEM estimates two models simultaneously, measurement model and structural model. The measurement model specifies how the latent variables are measured and the structural model specifies how the latent variables are related. SEM has major advantages over other techniques when analyzing models with multiple indicators (Li *et al.* 1998).

In this study collected data have been analyzed by LISREL (Linear Structural Relations model). This software as a SEM software involves unobserved/unobservable variables called latent variables. In contrast to observed variables, latent variables cannot be measured or observed directly, nor can data be collected on them. Latent variables are implied by the relationship among two or more measured variables. They are also known as factors or constructs. In this research, each construct represents a latent variable composed of three to five separate indicators. For example, (Lessons Learned) is one of the latent variables that could be measured by five variables (Overcome the problems', 'Handle a new acquisition', 'Adapt to varying circumstances', 'Work with new approaches', and 'Set up a new strategy'). To investigate the relationships between latent variables that can both act as dependent and independent variables, LISREL is an appropriate technique. This technique is able to represent dependence relationships among independent, latent, and dependent variables. Moreover, it can estimate several equations implying that the dependent variable in one equation can simultaneously be an independent variable in one or more other equations. This allows modeling of complex relationships, which is not possible with any of the other multivariate techniques available (Hair *et al.* 1998, Steenkamp & van Trijp 1991).

DEVELOPED MODEL

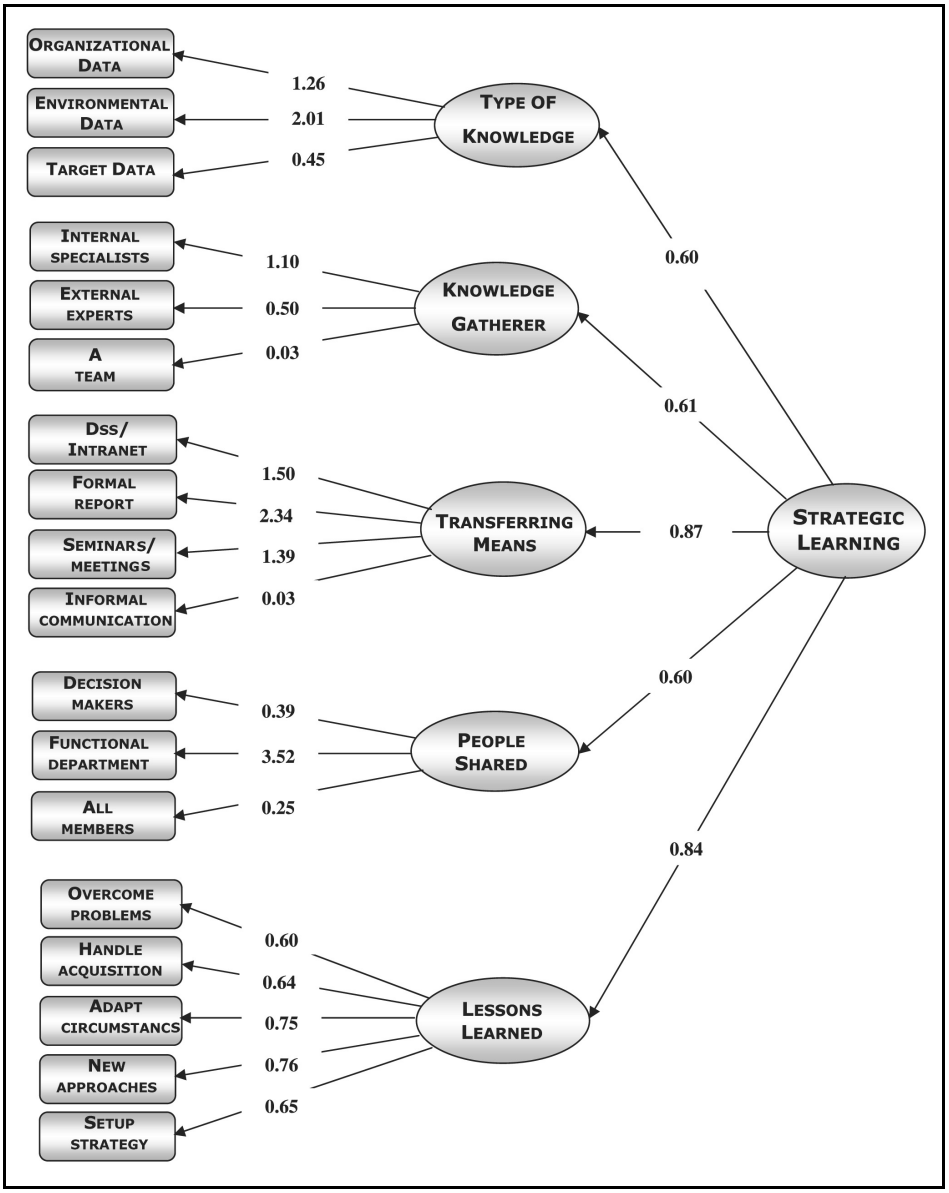

Figure 1. Structural model of "**Strategic Learning**"

This model specifies how latent variables can be measured by observed variables. These values show the resulting change in a dependent variable from a unit change in an independent variable when all other independent variables all be held constant.

Figure 1 illustrates a structural model of this study to estimate the importance of each factor in the strategic learning process. As shown in this model, the coefficient paths from "**Strategic Learning**" to "Transferring Means" (0.87) (described as Dss/Intranet, Formal Report, Seminar/Meeting, and Informal Communication) and "Lessons Learned" (0.84) (described as Overcome Problems, Handle Acquisition, Adapt Circumstances, New Approaches, and Setup Strategy) are very high. This model suggests that although "Type of Knowledge," "Knowledge Gatherer," "Lessons Learned," "People Shared," and "Transferring Means" are significant factors in affecting strategic learning, "Transferring Means" and "Lessons Learned" have stronger effects. This figure also shows the path coefficient of "**Type of Knowledge"** to "Environmental Data" (2.01) and "Organizational Data" (1.26) are stronger than the path coefficient to "Target Data" (0.45).

The coefficient paths from "**Knowledge Gatherer**" to "Internal specialists," "External experts," and "A team" are 1.10, 0.50, and 0.03, receptively. It means "Internal specialists" is the most important criteria of "**Knowledge Gatherer**" and "External experts" and "A team" are less important.

The paths from "**Transferring Means**" to the four hypothesized criteria, "DSS/Intranet" (1.50), "Formal report" (2.34), "Seminar/meeting" (1.39), and "Informal communication" (0.03) indicate that "DSS/Intranet," "Formal report," and "Seminar/meeting" have the strongest effects on "**Transferring Means**."

This model also represents three criteria, i.e., "Decision makers," "Functional department," and "All members" effect "**People Shared**." It shows "Functional department" with path coefficient of 3.52 has the highest influence on "**People Shared**."

Figure 1 contains "**Lessons Learned**" as a dependent variable and five criteria, which are "Overcome problems," "Handle acquisition," "Adapt circumstances," "New approaches," and "Setup strategy." This model indicates the effects of all hypothesized criteria on "**Lessons Learned**" as very strong.

DISCUSSION

A better understanding of strategic learning and realizing the importance of factors that have effects on strategic learning are the main implications of this study. This research has found that ***knowledge transferring*** including the transferring means used to store and transfer knowledge such as decision support systems/intranet, formal reports, meetings or seminars and informal communication and ***knowledge utilization*** including lessons learned from the past acquisitions such as obtaining new approach, adapting circumstances, and setting up a new strategy are the main factors that have an effect on strategic learning in the acquisition context.

These results support some findings of previous studies that believe distributing and sharing knowledge throughout the organization plays a vital furthermore role in the process of learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, Bhatt 2001) learning organizations should be able to generate, store, and transport this knowledge across all levels of an organization (Thomas, Sussman & Henderson 2001) and create mechanisms and systems to use and manage their knowledge (Sanchez & Heene 1998).

As Ozorhon *et al.* (2005) believe the process of learning in an organization increases the quality of strategic decisions. Because when decisions are made, new experiences can be achieved. These lessons can be used in decision making processes in the future, if they are distributed and shared among the members of the organization.

The most important limitation of this research refers to the nature of strategic management research. As a first problem, to find and access the strategic managers is difficult for a researcher. Another anticipated problem is their time. They are too busy or company policy does not allow them to answer any questions about their strategy. Moreover, they believe that transmitting their knowledge and experience is a time-consuming effort (Mintzberg 1994).

One of the major shortcoming of this study is that only one person is questioned for each acquisition. It was assumed that the respondent had enough knowledge about the strategy and organization practices.

In conclusion, despite its limitation, this study was an attempt to contribute to our knowledge of strategic learning in the acquisition context. However, the topic remains an under-research area. By using the given structure, similar studies can be carried out in other companies and about other types of strategic issues and comparison can be made.

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طريقة النموذج التركيبي لعملية التعليم الاستراتيجي في المحيط المكتسب

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خلاصة

تحتاج المنظمات للتوصل إلى استجابة جيدة للتغيرات البيئية، ودليل المدى البعيد للتحرك من الحاضر إلى المستقبل للتركيز على التزود من ردود أفعالهم واستخدامها بشكل فعال لتطوير استراتيجياتهم. إن عملية التعليم الإستراتيجي يمكنها أن تساعد المنظمات على استمرار التوسع في قدراتهم والحصول على إستراتيجية مرنة لإيجاد النتائج الحقيقية المطلوبة. تهدف هذه الدراسة لاكتشاف ظاهرة التعليم الإستراتيجي وذلك لفهم أحسن لمفهوم عملية التعليم المكتسب.

لقد تم تطوير طريقة النموذج التركيبي لاختبار العلاقة بين أساسيات بناء التعليم الإستراتيجي في المحيط المكتسب.

لقد تم إرسال استبيان إلكتروني إلى 212 شركة في بريطانيا والتي لها خبرة في تعلم الاكتساب. تم تحليل المعلومات باستخدام LISREL. لقد دلت نتائج هذه الدراسة على أن الدروس المستفادة من الاكتساب القديم والوسائل السمعية والبصرية لتحويل هذه الدروس هي العملية الرئيسية التي تؤثر على التعليم الاستراتيجي في المحيط المكتسب.