

Perception on the Application of a Learning Organisation Philosophy on Employee Performance at a selected University of Technology (UoT) in KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT:

The learning organisation philosophy is one of the tools businesses used to achieve their competitive advantages. It is a system in which employees learn from a number of situations aimed at assisting the organisation achieve its expected goals. It enables organisations sustain competitiveness through continuous learning. Hence, this study examines its application at a selected University of Technology (UoT) in KwaZulu-Natal.

Of the 1076 staff members belonging to four campuses of the university, 753 participated in the study. Descriptive and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to test the two objectives, that is, to examine opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at a selected UoT in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as to assess if the application of a learning organisation can improve employee performance. The participants were optimistic that the UoTs are capable of becoming the learning organisations. The learning organisation is a method that can improve employee performance. Hence, the original value of this study is in its approach in uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of the learning organisation philosophy in the UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

Keywords: competitive advantage, employee performance, Higher Education, learning organisation, Universities of Technology (UoTs).

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INTRODUCTION

The context of higher education is changing. This is due to several factors significantly transforming the higher education sector (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Responding to such challenges, organisations should adapt and learn continuously in order to maintain competitiveness. These challenges include global competition, technological advances, customer demands and government legislations. The UoTs are not immune from these environmental challenges. The learning organisation philosophy has thus become a prerequisite for survival (Liao, 2010). According to Bateman and Snell (2012), the learning organisation encourages businesses to experiment with new approaches, learn from previous

experiences and learn from other organisations. Binza (2005) defines the learning organisation as a philosophy in which people continuously expand their capacity for creating the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people frequently learn how to learn as a group. In a learning organisation environment, the emphasis is on continuous improvement of organisational processes and practices. According to Robbins (2011), a true learning organisation is able to improve service quality and employee performance. Hence, this study is motivated by a requisite for UoTs to provide a different approach in order to deal with environmental challenges faced by such institutions. The need to continuously improve

processes and practices in the UoTs form the basis of this study.

In essence, the learning organisation philosophy is used by businesses as an effective tool to pursue excellence. Werner (2011) indicates that the members operating in learning organisation environment limit their personal self-interest, as well as the fragmented departmental structures in order to work together to achieve the organisation's shared vision. The philosophy discourages a territorial mind set in which units or departments within an organisation operates in isolation. Robbins (2011) adds that the learning organisation has a collective sense of identity, a fundamental purpose of vision that is shared by every employee in the organisation. Daft (2010) states that people in the learning organisation are aware of the whole system, how everything fits together and how various parts of the organisation interact with one another.

The learning organisation philosophy encourages learning at all levels of the organisation (Bui, 2011). In a learning organisation, people have an insatiable desire for success (Sondhi, 2007). This attitude ensures that learning is constant. Weeks (2010) states that the learning organisation philosophy is becoming increasingly relevant because of the augmented complexity, uncertainty and rapidity of change in the business environment. It promotes communication and collaboration so that everyone is actively engaged in identifying and solving the problems, as well as enabling the organisation to continuously experiment, improve and increase its adaptability (Daft, 2010). Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal?
- Is the learning organisation perceived as a method of improving employee performance at the UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal?

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) explain that the context of higher education is changing as social, technological and globalisation factors are bringing significant transformation in higher education. Hence, this study examines the perception on the application of a learning organisation philosophy at a selected UoT in KwaZulu-Natal. It assesses if the application of a learning organisation has the ability to improve employee performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses an overview of a learning organisation, the higher education in the learning organisation discourse, as well as the influence of intellectual capital in a learning organisation environment. Organisation learning philosophy on employee performance concludes this section.

Overview of a Learning Organisation Philosophy

In the fast changing environment, it is essential for organisations to be market driven and learning oriented (Liao, 2009). The reality is that environmental challenges continuously affect organisations worldwide. From the South African perspective, Crouch (2011) indicates that organisations recognise the demand for more effective and efficient services. In the 21st century, no organisation can avoid the challenges of globalisation and knowledge economy (Lyle, 2012). Therefore, it is important for organisations to continuously learn new ways of conducting business in order to be able to solve problems, create core competences and, most importantly, to initiate new, conducive and adaptive systems thereby becoming highly flexible (Liao, 2010). Govender (2009) recommends a systematic and an institutionalised approach in the form of a learning organisation philosophy. The learning organisation is thus a foundation for inspiring collective learning in which members of an organisation pursue excellence in order to improve the organisational performance. Hence, Lyle (2012) explains that a learning organisation influences and reinforces a continuous learning culture in order to achieve the strategic objectives of an organisation.

The environment in which organisations operate has become turbulent and unpredictable, and a learning organisation philosophy is part of organisational vocabulary. Bateman and Snell (2013) recommend continuous learning so that organisations may respond effectively to environmental challenges. Consequently, the learning organisation philosophy is regarded as a key strategic tool for inspiring self-driven learning aimed at improving processes and practices of an organisation. In an environment that practices a learning organisation method, employees continuously search for excellent ideas thereby gaining a competitive advantage. Hence, Robbins (2011) describes a learning organisation as an organisation in which employees acquire, share and

apply new knowledge in order to outsmart competitors. The philosophy has the ability to empower the organisation to respond effectively to challenges. Peter Senge is regarded as the founder of the learning organisation philosophy (Hindle, 2008). He argues that the learning organisation philosophy has been influential and powerful for organisational effectiveness. Weeks (2010) explains that the learning organisation is an overarching philosophy connecting various departmental practices and processes as a coherent whole. In his theory, Capezio (2010) points out that a learning organisation can be described as a philosophy in which employees have the capacity to anticipate customer needs and respond to environmental challenges rapidly and effectively. In a learning organisation environment, people learn from every situation, focusing on reaching and exceeding the expected results. Consequently, they embody creative thinking and innovation, and are open and honest about admitting mistakes. As the business environment becomes increasingly dynamic and complex, Capezio (2010) warns that the successful organisation will be one that discovers how to increase commitment and capacity for learning at all levels of the organisation. Conner (2004) adds that, in the 21st century, only organisations that excel in continuous learning will survive. Commitment to learning, team learning and commitment to excellence differentiates learning organisations from traditional organisations. Vermaak (2009) stresses that the development of business organisations and institutions into learning organisations is regarded as a key strategy enabling organisations to remain competitive. Hence, this study examines opportunities for applying a learning organisation philosophy at the UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

Higher Education in the Learning Organisation discourse

Higher education institutions are not immune to the challenges faced by ordinary businesses operating in the 21st century and are part of the modern world (Perumal, 2010). Consequently, the UoTs must become aware of the needs and demands of society, industry, the government and other relevant stakeholders. Hindle (2010) suggests that UoTs, in particular, must respond to challenges and effectively use technology and be innovative in their approach. Given the nature of challenges in the business world, organisations are becoming learning organisations (Friedman, 2005). As is the case with corporate organisations, universities

should learn that inflexibility and failure to respond to challenges could lead to losses. Friedman (2005) emphasises that, in a fast changing environment, resistance to change and inflexibility is a prescription for disaster. As has previously been mentioned, Lewis (2008) explains that society, and all its institutions, are not in a stable state but a continuous process of transformation. The reality is that these challenges are unavoidable. Organisations desiring to remain competitive must realise the importance of learning. Hence, the learning organisation philosophy is regarded as an effective tool in connecting the organisation with its environment. Lewis (2008) adds that, in the context of higher education, the ground is fertile for the application of the learning organisation philosophy.

The existence of the learning organisation philosophy has long been recognised as an effective approach used by business organisations in responding to environmental challenges. Yeo (2005) describes the learning organisation as a business with powerful capacity to effectively collect, store, transfer knowledge and continuously transform itself in line with the demands of customers and government legislations. Weeks (2010) argues that an effective use of technology is an essential strategy of a learning organisation because it optimises both learning and employee performance. He states that the systems thinking is one of the main components of the learning organisation. This approach is vitally important as it promotes a culture of seeing the big picture associated with the overall organisational goals; not merely the individual, myopic and job functions (Capezio, 2010). The lack of systems thinking is evident in the UoTs thus the departments are operating in isolation (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Systems thinking stimulates collaborative culture in higher education institutions. However, Kezar and Lester (2009) reveal that departmental silos and hierarchical structures hamper collaborative culture in higher education institutions. Examining studies that focuses on the learning organisation philosophy in the context of higher education, Bui (2011) maintains that the UoTs are uniquely privileged to explore, apply and advance the philosophy of a learning organisation in their own ways. According to Bazolek (2010), higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt system's perspective, which is a critical part of a learning organisation philosophy. Hence, this study focuses on the learning organisation philosophy in the context of the UoTs. This considers that higher education institutions are operating in a dynamic environment and expected

to respond effectively to complex challenges (Omerzel, 2014).

In a rapidly changing and developing world, transforming businesses into learning organisations is critical. The ability to adapt to continuously changing the higher education environment is important (Recepoglu, 2013). Bui (2011) adds that the learning organisation philosophy has become relevant and applicable to various sectors and industries. In his study, he emphasised the importance of a learning organisation philosophy in the context of higher education.

One of the fundamental factors in the learning organisation is a need for creating a learning culture (Perumal, 2010). This stimulates willingness to learn at all levels of the organisation. Analysing the attributes of the learning organisation, Echols (2009) focuses on both individuals in an organisation and the organisation itself. In the learning organisation, employees have the potential and the willingness to contribute and help their organisation achieve positive results. They share a belief that knowledge and improved skills are critical for both them and the organisation (Buzalek, 2010). Echols (2009) reiterates that the willingness to learn is an essential condition for a strong culture of learning in a learning organisation. The positive attitude, practices, the goals and values are some of the attributes of the learning organisation. Emphasising his views on the attributes of the learning organisation, he alludes that employees must not only display the attributes but also talk the language of the learning organisation. Weeks (2010) stresses that continuous learning has become a necessity in dealing with the complexities with which organisations, communities, the industry and the government are confronted. He believes that continuous learning and knowledge go hand in hand in finding the solutions sought by organisations. He refers to organisations as institutions caught in dangerous and complex waves of challenges. With this as a background, Bozalek (2010) agrees that the learning organisation has been promoted as an effective tool with which to deal with challenges of globalisation, customer demands, competitors, and changing government laws. As a result of uncertainties and accelerated changes in the business environment, the learning organisation philosophy is increasingly relevant (Dunnion & O'Donovan, 2014). What seems to be the case with higher education institutions and organisations in other sectors is that there is still confusion in terms

of what the learning organisation means and how it may be realised in practice (Werner, 2011).

Influence of Intellectual Capital in a Learning Organisation Environment

There is a growing global awareness that intellectual capital is the key intangible asset for success in the current and future economic environment (Ehrhard, 2007). The drivers of value creation in organisations have shifted from tangible assets in the form of buildings and fixed infrastructure to intangible assets such as intellectual capital. Hence, there is a need for organisations to focus on creating, sharing, adapting and using intellectual capital in such a way that it becomes possible to find newer and more innovative methods for improving products and services (Creswell, 2009). Atak and Ertugut (2010) indicate that the learning organisation philosophy ignites and promotes organisational commitment in which employees adopt and internalise the aims, goals and values of the organisation. Such organisations have a strong will to learn. Thus, the learning organisation drive helps them develop a sense of belonging and shared vision. Atak and Ertugut (2010) outlines the requirements for the learning organisation philosophy. These include the need for people to combine emotional, intellectual and physical energy, as well as their commitments thus ensuring the success of the organisation. People with higher commitments strive to help the organisation achieve its strategic objectives and remain competitive.

Organisation Learning Philosophy on Employee Performance

Organisations in both the public and private sectors need a philosophy that will shape employees, instil the culture and values of pursuing excellence, learning and remaining competitive. According to Liker (2011), this philosophy is the foundation in which to build adaptive and world-class learning organisation. Toyota, for instance, ignites and motivates employees consistently to push the boundaries of their abilities. The organisation learning philosophy helps them not only to remain competitive but also to add value to society and their customers (Liker, 2011). It stimulates a positive atmosphere in which challenges are accepted with courage and a positive spirit. Werner (2011) adds that their organisation learning philosophy serves to link key learning goals that are related with key collaborative efforts thus

producing and designing ways in which an organisation will conduct its business. As a result, this study examines if a learning organisation has the ability to improve employee performance in the UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research will be discussed under the following headings, namely: research design and approach, research site, the target population, sample size, method used for data collection as well as the measurement and analysis.

Research design and approach

This study was quantitative in nature. Bryman and Bell (2007) explain that the quantitative approach involves the use of statistical procedures to analyse the data collected. Consequently, after the measurements of the relevant variables, the scores were transformed using statistical methods. The study was also conclusive in design. Conclusive

Sample size

A simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants. A sample size of 753 employees participated in the study. Hence, the

TABLE 1: percentage breakdown of employees in terms of their sectors

Sector		Number of employees that participated in the study per sector	Percentage breakdown
1.	Academic	318	42.2%
2.	Administrative	435	57.8%

Source: data from research survey (2019)

Table 1 indicates that the number of respondents were almost at a ratio of 6:4 for administrative and academic sectors, respectively. The ratio is a reflection of a split between the administrative and academic sectors in the institution.

Data collection method

The collection of data was achieved by self-administering the questionnaires to 1076 participants. However, 753 questionnaires were collected, representing a 70 per cent response rate, considered high compared with the norm for survey responses (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

Measurement and analysis

studies are meant to provide information that is useful in reaching decision-making (Yin, 2008).

Research Site

The UoT located in the eThekweni District Municipality, in KwaZulu-Natal, participated in the study. The institution was formed in 2002 as a result of a merger of the two Technikons. It has six campuses, which is, two in Pietermaritzburg and four in the eThekweni District Municipality. It has six faculties, namely: Accounting and Informatics, the Applied Sciences, Arts and Design, Management Sciences, Engineering, as well as the Built Environment. The academic programmes offerings are achieved through both part-time and full-time lecturing. Teaching, learning and research are its focus.

Target population

All the four campuses of the university participated in the study. The target population comprised of 1076 employees, that is, 630 administrative and 446 academic staff members.

following Table 1 presents the number of employees that participated in the study as well as the percentage breakdown in accordance to their sectors.

In line with research framework, the study measured nine variables using the questionnaire. It employed a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Descriptive and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to test the two objectives.

- **Opportunities for applying a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.** Five items are listed as opportunities for applying a learning organisation philosophy (Senge, 2006; Slocum, 2010; Liao, 2010; Govender, 2009; Bateman & Snell, 2013; Robbins, 2011). These include knowledge sharing across departments; the sharing of best

practices; the integration of knowledge into daily operations; mistakes treated as learning opportunities; and the adoption of a sense of community by employees.

- **Learning organisation as a method for improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.** The four learning organisation variables for employee performance (Liker, 2011; Werner, 2011) include the organisational members striving for excellence; capacity development viewed as an essential element; the use of new and effective ways of performing duties by employees; as well as employees providing initiatives in improving organisational processes.

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The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 was used to analyse data.

STUDY RESULTS

Perception on the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

The following Table 2 presents participants' responses on the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

TABLE 2: perception on the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

Variables	Percentage accepting opportunities for the application of a learning organisation
The application of a learning organisation improves employee performance	81.0
The institution is capable of becoming a learning organisation	85.1

Source: data from research survey (2019)

Respondents in Table 2 were optimistic that the application of a learning organisation would improve employee performance. Approximately, 85 per cent of the respondents believe that the institution is capable of becoming a learning organisation. In addition, 81 per cent indicates that employee performance can improve as a result of the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

Opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

ANOVA was used to test employee perceptions on the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy. This is a hypothesis testing technique used in determining whether there is a statistically significant difference in means occurring between two or more groups (Zinkmund, 2013). ANOVA is a statistical procedure using the F-ratio in testing the overall fit of a linear. It is used to test whether group means differ significantly (Field, 2009). The interpretation of ANOVA test results is based on the following:

1. If the **p** value is less than or equal to **0.05**, this means that there is a statistically significant difference between the two variables.
2. If the **p** value is greater than **0.05**, this means that there is no statistically significant difference between the two variables.

For this study, ANOVA has been used to test the significant difference between study variables relating to the opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

The following Table 3 analyse employees' perception on the opportunities relating to the application of a learning organisation at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

TABLE 3: opportunities for the application of a learning organisation at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

Opportunities for the application of a learning organisation at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal					
Variables	ANOVA	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Knowledge sharing amongst employees	Between Groups	9.410	9.410	8.362	0.004
	Within Groups	219.443	1.125		
	Total	228.853			
The sharing of best practices across departments	Between Groups	3.730	3.730	3.797	0.053
	Within Groups	195.533	0.983		
	Total	199.264			
The integration of knowledge into daily operations	Between Groups	1.244	1.244	1.214	0.272
	Within Groups	200.917	1.025		
	Total	202.162			
Mistakes amongst employees treated as learning opportunities	Between Groups	0.792	0.792	0.723	0.396
	Within Groups	217.934	1.095		
	Total	218.726			
The adoption of a sense of community by employees	Between Groups	0.739	0.739	0.606	0.439
	Within Groups	239.301	1.221		
	Total	240.040			

Source: data from research survey (2019)

Results in Table 3 reveal that there is a statistical significant agreement on knowledge sharing amongst employees (at $p < 0.05$). However, the following study variables have no statistical significant agreement between them (at $p > 0.05$). These include:

- the sharing of best practices across departments;
- the integration of knowledge into daily operations;
- mistakes amongst employees are treated as learning opportunities; and
- the adoption of a sense of community by employees.

This indicates the disagreement amongst employees that the sharing of best practices; the integration of knowledge into best practices; the recognition of mistakes as learning opportunities; as well as the

adoption of a sense of community are expected opportunities for applying a learning organization at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

The learning organisation as a method for improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

The ANOVA test was also used to assess the significant differences between employees on study variables relating to the learning organisation as a method of improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

The following Table 4 analyse employees' perception on the learning organisation as a method of improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal.

TABLE 4: learning organisation as a method of improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal

Learning organisation as a method of improving employee performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal					
Variables	ANOVA	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
The organisational members strive for excellence	Between Groups Within Groups Total	1.805 221.371 223.177	1.805 1.129	1.599	0.208
The capacity development viewed as an essential element	Between Groups Within Groups Total	0.209 236.709 236.918	0.209 1.220	0.171	0.679
Employees use new and effective ways of performing their duties	Between Groups Within Groups Total	1.224 249.232 250.455	1.224 1.246	0.982	0.323
Employees provide initiatives in improving organisational processes	Between Groups Within Groups Total	6.092 197.441 203.533	6.092 1.013	6.016	0.015

Source: data from research survey (2019)

Results in Table 4 indicate that there is no statistical significant agreement (at $p > 0.05$) that a learning organisation philosophy will influence organisational members strive for excellence; that capacity development be viewed as an essential element; and it stimulates the use of new and effective ways of performing duties by employees. However, it reveals that there is a statistical significant agreement (at $p < 0.05$) on employee initiatives in improving organisational processes.

DISCUSSIONS

The study examined opportunities for the application of a learning organisation philosophy at a selected UoT in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants were optimistic that the learning organisation philosophy can be applied at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal. Bui (2011) maintains that UoTs are uniquely privileged to explore, apply and advance the philosophy of a learning organisation in their own ways. The study established opportunities that can be experienced from applying the learning organisation philosophy. It has the ability to improve knowledge sharing amongst employees. The results also established that the learning organisation is a method for improving employee

performance at UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal. It provides a situation that shape employees and instil a culture and values of pursuing excellence and learning, while remaining competitive (Liker, 2011). According to Werner (2011), the philosophy of a learning organisation is to link key goal related issues with key collaborative drivers thus producing and designing ways by which the organisation will conduct its business. Results also revealed that employee initiatives for improving organisational processes could be realised from its application.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The learning organisation should become a prerequisite for business survival (Liao, 2010). The practice encourages organisations to experiment new approaches, learn from previous experiences and learn from other organisations (Bateman & Snell, 2012). Besides the achievement of the study objective, the study established that the application of a learning organisation has a potential to improve:

1. knowledge sharing amongst employees; and

2. employee performance through their initiatives.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

There are only two UoTs in KwaZulu-Natal. However, the study was limited to the UoT situated in the eThekweni District Municipality. Consequently, the results cannot be generalised to other UoTs in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Organisations have a strong willingness to support the application of a learning organisation. The learning organisation philosophy emphasises the creation of an organisational culture that promotes continuous learning by all employees at all levels of the organisation. Hence, management recognise this as an opportunity to implement in their organisations. Atak and Erturgut (2010) stress that a supportive learning environment and employee commitment are necessary for a successful application of a learning organisation.

FUTURE RESEARCH REQUIRED

The nature of this study did not allow the investigation to determine the long-term survival of a learning organisation philosophy to a wider sector of the economic activity. It is recommended that future studies examine the influence of a learning organisation on employee performance in the traditional universities in South Africa.

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