



Chapter IV

Kantian Inquiring Systems: A Case Study

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Abstract

Kantian inquiring systems can be used as a model for learning organizations. Based on Churchman's (1971) inquiring systems and Courtney, Croasdell, and Paradice's (1998) inquiring organizations, this chapter discusses the Kantian inquiring system and applies it to an organization in the retail industry. Kantian systems take input, process the input using multiple models, and interpret the data in terms of the best fitting model. Accepted output from the system is integrated into the system's fact net. The guarantor of the system is the fit between the data and the model. The authors make recommendations in light of the Kantian inquiring system to the retail organization.

Introduction

Churchman (1971) described five inquiring systems, based on the work of five major Western philosophers: Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Hegel, and Singer. This chapter explores the

Kantian inquiring system and illustrates its principles in the context of an organization in the retail industry. The five parts of the model, *a priori* theory, input, process, output, and guarantor, draw from the works of Churchman (1971) and Courtney, Croasdell, and Paradice (1998). Each part will be illustrated in the context of the world's largest retail organization, Wal-Mart. Recommendations in light of the philosophical basis are also considered. A summary of the characteristics of the Kantian inquiring system is shown in Table 1.

Wal-Mart is suitable to explore as an example of an inquiring system and, specifically, a Kantian one for two reasons. First, Wal-Mart is a rich organization to study due to the fact that it is the largest retailer in the world and the largest employer in the United States after the federal government (Ortega, 1998; walmartstores.com, 2003). With 1,517 stores, 1,333 supercenters, 528 Sam's Clubs, 52 Neighborhood Markets, 1,297 international units, and sales of \$244.5 billion in the fiscal year ending January 31, 2003, Wal-Mart hires more than 1,000,000 employees (called *associates*) in the United States and more than 1,300,000 worldwide, serving over 100 million customers weekly worldwide. Such a large organization provides complex interactions among employees, consumers, and suppliers that are very appropriate to examine in the context of an inquiring system and a learning organization. Second, several characteristics of the Kantian inquiring system are exemplified in the management and operations of Wal-Mart, as detailed in the chapter below. Since the purpose of this chapter is to examine Wal-Mart as a Kantian inquiring organization, only examples of a Kantian system are discussed, excluding examples that may pertain to other inquiring systems that could be employed by Wal-Mart in certain aspects of its managerial and operational levels.

Table 2 shows a comparison of the different types of the four Wal-Mart retail divisions. Wal-Mart Discount Stores offer a variety of retail merchandise, including clothing, automotive products, health and beauty aids, home furnishings, electronics, hardware, toys, sporting merchandise, lawn and garden items, pet supplies, jewelry, and housewares. Besides the retail offerings of its regular discount stores, the Wal-Mart Supercenter facilitates one-stop shopping and includes grocery items, a vision center, Tire & Lube Express, Radio Grill restaurant, photography shop and photo center, hair salon, bank, and placement agencies. Wal-Mart Markets provide groceries, pharmaceuticals, and general

Table 1. *Kantian Inquiring Systems (Courtney, Croasdell & Paradice, 1998)*

<i>System</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Given	Space-time framework Theories
Input	Internal and external
Process	Build models Create theories Interpret data Select the best model
Guarantor	Fit between data and model
Output	Fact nets

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