

Inquiring Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

In order to manage knowledge and operate successfully in today's information-intensive business environments, various organizational forms have emerged (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The form that an organization takes has consequences for communication and dissemination of information, and thereby the ability to engage in organizational learning. Some of these forms compress knowledge at the root level of the organization, while others facilitate the search for useful knowledge within the organization. Other forms are capable of supporting organizational members who must synthesize knowledge from diverse sources. If a firm begins to reconfirm that knowledge management and core competencies are at the heart of organizational performance, the demand on organizations to develop core competencies and to create and manage knowledge intensifies. Even after realizing the critical role of knowledge in the present competitive environments, firms are struggling with managing and creating knowledge.

Growing interest in a firm's intellectual capital and collective knowledge have led to ways in which organizations improve knowledge (organizational learning), store knowledge (organizational memory), and share knowledge (knowledge transfer). Although often discussed separately, these three concepts are tightly interwoven, and all must be considered when an organization strives to move toward a knowledge-based competency. These aspects fall under the broad and complex umbrella of knowledge management. In a review of knowledge management literature, Schultze and Leidner (2002, p. 218) suggest a definition of knowledge management as being the "generation, representation, storage, transfer, transformation, application, embedding, and protecting of organizational knowledge." While their definition is not the only one, nor may all researchers or practitioners agree with its appropriateness, it does demonstrate the incredible complexity that knowledge management presents. The authors note that research in knowledge management is a complex interdependency of collaboration (both in knowledge/informa-

tion sharing and work), organizational memory, and organizational learning.

An organization striving toward knowledge management competency may be best served by incorporating an organizational form that facilitates learning and thus the expansion of organizational memory. However, choosing one form may not be supportive of the multiple types of learning required by such an organization. These organizations should adopt the form of an inquiring organization (Courtney, Croasdell, & Paradise, 1998) and use it to structure flexible subforms that facilitate the learning process.

This article describes inquiring organizations and considers the appropriateness of applying philosophical perspective to organizational form. The next section provides a background to inquiring organizations. The latter part of the article focuses on how inquiring organizations can take on multiple forms. The article concludes with a discussion of areas for future investigation.

BACKGROUND: INQUIRING SYSTEMS, INQUIRING ORGANIZATIONS AND LEARNING

Inquiring systems are characterized by properties described by Churchman (1971), who develops five inquirers based on the writings of five Western philosophers—Leibniz, Locke, Kant, Hegel, and Singer. While an in-depth discussion of the inquirers is not within the scope of this article, each of the inquirers is briefly introduced in the following sections on inquiring organization subforms.

Inquiring systems create and manage knowledge, and provide a component called a guarantor that promotes accuracy and reduces redundancy in organizational memory (Hall, Paradise, & Courtney, 2003). They can provide the basis for a knowledge-oriented organization by facilitating the creation of new organizational knowledge and the adaptation of existing knowledge in wickedly changing situations (Hall et al., 2003). *Inquiring organizations* are based on inquiring systems (Courtney et al., 1998).

Inquiring organizations and learning organizations are terms that are often used interchangeably; however, there is one critical difference between the two. To be an inquiring organization, the organization's philosophical foundation must be laid on the principles of inquiring systems as discussed by Churchman (1971). Both the learning organization and the inquiring organization aspire to learn. Learning organizations primarily engage in double-loop learning (e.g., reacting to a problem by both fixing the problem (single-loop learning) and making changes to underlying norms that may have contributed to the problem) (Argyris & Schön, 1996) and often approach knowledge management in a reactive manner rather than the proactive process of the inquiring organization. However, an inquiring organization *inquires*—that is, it continuously searches and investigates its environment and engages in behavior that examines the learning process itself with an end goal of increasing learning efficiency (triple-loop learning). In this manner, the organization challenges the assumptions on which its behavior is based, effectively examining not the most effective means to an end, but examining the foundation of means themselves (Isaacs, 1993). This provides the capacity to routinely check organizational memory for inaccuracies, redundancies, or information that is no longer relevant (Hall et al., 2003).

Given the complexity of any organization moving toward knowledge competency, one can see that its support needs go beyond managerial style, technology, or process design. A knowledge-based organization must be considered in its entirety; however, providing an adequate foundation that can support such an organization is not easy. Churchman's (1971) inquirers, and the inquiring organization in particular, provide a basis for that foundation.

THE MAIN FOCUS: THE INQUIRING ORGANIZATION

The inquiring organization is a mesh of integrated inquiring systems that operate singly or together depending on the complexity of the environment in which the organizational unit finds itself operating. Each of the inquirers discussed by Churchman (1971) has specific strengths that allow it to operate efficiently in specific contexts, and together the inquirers have the ability to handle the complexity and the chaotic environment in which many modern organizations operate. Each of the inquirers is suited to a particular organizational form and environment. For instance, the Leibnizian inquirer is suited to a hierarchical form where knowledge is pushed throughout the organization. Lockean inquiry is more suited to a network form where information is

pulled into the network; knowledge is created specifically for that network's context.

Inquirers in the Churchmanian tradition embody different organizational subforms, but integration of the forms into the inquiring organizational metaform allows homeostasis to survive against the elements, and in doing so, supports the characteristics of an inquiring organization. We therefore define the inquiring organizational metaform as a complex structure of multiple organizational subforms working together for the benefit of the organization. We now discuss the subforms in terms of their architecture and learning characteristics.

The Leibnizian Subform

The Leibnizian inquirer is the most basic of the inquirers and provides the inquiring organization with its initial set of facts (fact nets) and axioms derived from formulas that comprise the foundation of organizational memory. These fact nets are created by identifying and testing a hypothesis using basic axioms stored in the system (Churchman, 1971). This inquirer is considered a closed system; that is, it functions within a limited set of relationships. Learning that is attributed to the Leibnizian inquirer is primarily based in the theory of autopoiesis which is the ability to self-perpetuate and produce through a series of relationships in a closed, stable environment. Organizations or organizational units that exist in an environment of stability and routine do well to adopt the Leibnizian inquirer as their organizational form.

This structured environment requires adherence to rules and regulations; learning within the organization is a push rather than pull process. Learning occurs at the top of the organization and is pushed downward throughout the organization by processes such as demonstration workshops. Because of the explicit nature of the information being passed downward throughout the organization, teaching is not generally a necessary means of information dissemination; the printed rules and handbooks of the organization serve the function well.

The Lockean Subform

The Lockean inquirer is a well-suited system for a relatively stable, but highly social environment. This inquirer is founded on principles of agreement embedded in classification of observations. The Lockean inquirer's members share a common belief and vision, culminating in shared mental models of the organization's environment, tasks, and strategies. Learning is a group effort and does not occur without consensus. Thus, relationships and communication are integral facets of this inquirer (Churchman, 1971).

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