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## The Social Dimension of Knowledge Management and Business Competitiveness

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**Abstract:**

*This research explores the knowledge management approach for human resources, where there is a new spirit of learning and skill enhancement. It aims to answer to the following question: What is the effect of the social dimension of knowledge management on business and what are its implications for competitiveness? In response, we conducted a quantitative research based on the technique based survey of a questionnaire developed and administered to a sample of Tunisian companies belonging to the service sector. Analysis of research shows that competitiveness is a multidimensional result. The practical contribution is summed up in the presentation to the services companies responsible a human solution to ensure better capitalization, sharing and creation of new knowledge and understanding of the conditions of success of such an approach, which consists in adapting to their environment, essentially, cultural.*

**Keywords:** Social dimension of the management of knowledge-learning-competitiveness-environment of the company

### 1. Introduction

In order to emerge in the future, companies must establish their competitiveness on capitalization, sharing and creation of new knowledge: it is the age of knowledge-based competitiveness (Nonaka, 1994, Ermine, 2003, Harvey, 2011; Barbaroux, 2012). The main role is given to the individuals themselves who must demonstrate capacities to create and use knowledge in an efficient and intelligent way in an environment in perpetual evolution. This period of economic transformation affects production systems, skills acquisition and development processes, the training and learning process, labor relations and modes of communication (Dube and Pare, 1999; Bergeron, 2000). So, the question is whether the traditional methods of management are still valid.

The answer is no, since the acceleration of the pace of information and communication technologies requires the implementation of modern knowledge management practiced by "knowledge architects" (Mack, 1995) Dialogue and exchanges to create value. Knowledge management refers to "a set of concepts, methods and technologies enabling members of an organization to work together in a direction defined by the company, to link existing information, knowledge generation and Development of individual and collective skills"(Knauf, 2010).

The association of competitiveness with knowledge management practice refers to the ability of firms to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage through distinctive skills, fairly developed innovation processes and better adaptation to the environment. Being competitive, generates a high capacity to compete, to present know-how in products and services offered on the market and to cooperate with other companies in knowledge-intensive activities (Schiuma, 2012; Wang Et al, 2011)

The centrality of today's knowledge management in the foundation of companies makes it imperative to understand the conditions for success. Hence the interest of evaluating the effects of moderation of the cultural environment on the direct relationship between knowledge management and the competitiveness of the company, a problem often overlooked.

This research falls within a theoretical perspective and aims to explore the social dimension of knowledge management. The general problem of this research can be formulated as follows: "What is the effect of the social dimension of knowledge management on business and what are its implications for competitiveness?"

To answer this question, we carried out an empirical study, where we adopted a quantitative approach based on the questionnaire survey technique in Tunisian companies.

## 1.1. Social Dimension of Knowledge Management

### 1.1.1. Definition of Knowledge Management and Its Objectives

#### 1.1.1.1. Definition

A broad field of research (Bruneau and Pujos, 1992, Langdon, 1998, Epingard, 1999, Foray, 2000, Knauf, 2010) tends to define knowledge as a cognitive resource and asset that can be codified, stored and disseminated within the organization (Habib, 2010), other issues arising from work on learning and organizational knowledge-building approach to knowledge as a permanent process of constructing representations and enriching knowledge (Prax, 1997).

In order to increase and accelerate knowledge development, Ballay (1999) proposes a knowledge management system composed of four stages: interaction (group work, discussion, sharing), integration (tests, operational processes), capitalization (Protect, codify, count, standardize, preserve, and reactivate) and transmission (training, tutoring). In a broad approach, knowledge management is a set of organizational modes and technologies designed to create, collect, organize, store, disseminate, use and transfer knowledge in the enterprise. The work of Jacob and Pariat (2002) emphasizes the individual definition of advanced knowledge management as a strategy to formally structure the capital explicit and tacit knowledge of an organization in relation to strategic directions and its needs. Innovation and improvement of competitiveness, organized around processes of knowledge management where man is the first place of interaction and creation of knowledge.

In this research, we retain the social dimension of knowledge management, which advocates that this shared and lasting management of knowledge has a strong concern for human groups (Jean Michel, 2001). This approach considers knowledge management as a set of concepts, methods and technologies for the collective development and use of shared knowledge (Genelot, 2001).

#### 1.1.1.2. Objectives of Knowledge Management

In order to address the issue of knowledge management and its objectives, we will first distinguish its tacit aspects from its codifiable aspects. This distinction is due to Polany and can be the foundation of a new approach to the production of knowledge in the organization and its management. It was later expanded in 1987 by Winter.

- Codified knowledge:

It is a formalized knowledge, transmissible by means of a formal language with a systematic language, with a code.

- Embodied knowledge:

This knowledge is deeply fixed in actions, use and application in a specific context. It can take very diverse forms such as expertise, skills, know-how. It is difficult to measure. It can take very diverse forms such as expertise, skills, know-how. It is difficult to measure.

Whatever its nature, knowledge must be managed. This Knowledge Management project is a project that touches all the functions of the company by setting up a human resources organization that facilitates the process of valuing knowledge by means of material resources (computer tools). Numerous studies have focused on knowledge management (Genelot 1998, Tissevere 1999, Michel 2001, Dupuich-Rabasse 2008, Sandhawalia and Dalcher 2011, Barbaroux 2012, Schiuma 2012):

\* The capitalization of knowledge: It is a question of analyzing knowledge, valuing it, maintaining it and storing it in a safe way and ensuring that it does not depreciate (Ballay, 1999; Ermine, 2003).

\* Knowledge sharing is a fundamental expectation of knowledge management, with which it is often confused (Deltour and Roussel, 2010, Knauf, 2010, Harvey, 2011). The strategic slogan is "move from individual intelligence to collective intelligence".

\* The creation of knowledge: This creation is strongly linked to permanent innovation. The strategic slogan is "innovate to survive" (Nonaka, 1994, Wang, Su and Yang, 2011, Barbaroux, 2012).

Based on this literature, we have identified knowledge management as a process to capitalize, share and create new knowledge. We are therefore aware of the difficulty of measuring the management of intangible resources. In this framework, theories suggest that this management can be measured by the degree of managers' perception of this practice, as well as its different aspects. This management exists when the organization implements measures for: (Ramirez, 1999, Gold et al., 2001, Ermine, 2003, Ferraressi et al., 2012):

- Create and capitalize knowledge to achieve its goals;
- Share this knowledge among members of the organization;
- Apply this knowledge to create value.

## 1.2. Social Dimension of Knowledge Management: What Impact on the Business?

The social dimension of knowledge management focuses on lifelong learning as an endogenous and collective process that has positive effects on the dynamics of knowledge creation and on the enterprise, itself (Koeing, 1997; Tarrondeau, 1998; Tissevere, 1999, Prusak, 2002).

### 1.2.1. Learning: A Knowledge Management Process

Organizational learning is a dynamic process that helps companies to acquire new knowledge: they can be innate, transferred, acquired or developed within the organization, sometimes unlearned (Tarondeau, 1998). Organizational learning is not limited to a process of knowledge acquisition, but also involves processes of dissemination, interpretation, confrontation and exchange that can build collective knowledge with positive effects on the organization and its management. It is an endogenous and collective process that is the basis of the evolution of knowledge. It is also a knowledge management process (Ermine, 2003).

We retain the field of organizational learning and knowledge management as two sources of competitive advantage: organizational learning is the theme and source of independent practices of knowledge management.

### 1.2.2. Skills Management and Knowledge Management

The production of organizational knowledge requires, on the part of workers, certain individual skills and an ability to learn create and develop specialized knowledge. Competence is defined as the mobilization of individual resources within a particular situation that demands a particular activity for a specific purpose (Dimitri, 1999). This competency is knowledge in action in three dimensions: a knowledge dimension (knowledge), a technical dimension (know-how) and a behavioral dimension (attitudes or skills) (Durand, 2000).

In this research, we emphasize the need to manage the cognitive resources of a company that relies on people's ability to appropriate, use and develop collective knowledge. Knowledge itself is no longer managed, but the collective that creates it, hence the notion of "cooperative management of knowledge" (Ermine, 2003). What counts for this management is the work in synergy, the formation of teams of work, the collaboration and the coordination between the different actors of the company. Thus, knowledge management is inevitably linked to the management of skills as resources that can be mobilized in the production of a good or a service by the company. According to Ermine (2003), knowledge management is seen as a management of cognitive resources in a production activity, and skills management is seen as an action of identification, valorisation and development of skills.

## **2. The Social Dimension of Knowledge Management and Competitiveness: A Causal Relationship**

According to the approach developed by Grant (1996), the competitiveness of a firm depends fundamentally on the diversity and strategic value of the specific knowledge it holds and on its ability to effectively integrate this knowledge by individuals. The company must define a knowledge base, i.e., assess its strengths and weaknesses and the areas to be strengthened (Boblin and Brenner, 1996). This common basis of the company makes it possible to make a living memory accessible to all (Bounfour, 1998) is considered as an essential lever in the development of competitive advantages. The competitiveness of firms is thus based on the ability to combine and coordinate their practice around the knowledge heritage that must be best managed: this knowledge management practice is crucial in the race for competitiveness (Knauf, 2010; Wang Et al, 2011, Schiuma, 2012) and allows the company to derive a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991).

Knowledge management theories have emphasized the direct relationship between knowledge management and innovation (Hatchuel et al, 2001, Denervaud and Chatin, 2009, Attour and Ayerbe, 2012, Sandhawalía and Dalcher, 2011). Management aims to combine the knowledge held by individuals in order to create and apply new knowledge with the aim of improving the innovation process (Harkema and Browayes, 2003). At this level, Yann De Kermadec (2001) suggests that knowledge management is both at the heart of innovation and fostered by innovation. In the same vein Drucker (1998) argues that if we integrate the idea of innovation in human resources management, team leadership, and cooperation, then innovation will become a natural part of Culture, business and business philosophy.

It is in this sense that we can note that innovation now goes beyond the reduced capacity of a "team" to engage in a dynamic of "independent collaboration" (Quinn, 1999). The perspective in this research leads us to conclude that any organization must put in place a knowledge management system that allows its employees to work collaboratively in order to propose practical and innovative solutions.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The paradigm used in our study is a positivist paradigm which involves developing a model in the literature, applying it and verifying its validity in particular cases. The empirical methodology used is an exploratory methodology which is characterized by flexibility in the methods used to deepen the subject and gain a global view (Evrard et al., 2003). The aim of this study is to familiarize oneself with the practice of knowledge management in Tunisian companies and to understand the factors that can influence it and that can determine the behavior of these companies to achieve competitiveness.

Hence the empirical investigation technique most appropriate to our study is that of the questionnaire survey. We used a nominal scale to measure nominal (qualitative) variables: respondents had to choose between several alternatives and between yes-no binary variables. The variables used are as follows :

<b>The variables used</b>
<u>Human Resources Development:</u> -(E) training, endowment of a center, internships, retraining, information day, continuity of practices, allocation of a sufficient budget ... - Group learning process, learning by doing, learning by using ... - Skills, experience, ability to work in different jobs, quality and quantity of work, creativity ... - Cooperative knowledge management, workflow, groupware, communication using a common language, existence of conflicts, shared representation of problems ...
<u>Knowledge Management:</u> - Modes of knowledge creation, knowledge quality, the objective of knowledge management, use of specialists to manage, presence of technical means ...
<u>Competitiveness:</u> - Reduction of costs, quality of products, quality and quantity of know-how present in products and services, innovation, creation of new jobs ...
<u>Environment of the company :</u> -use of ICT, Internet, computerized technologies, e-commerce ... -perception of managers

*Table 1*

Initially, a pre-test was launched with 20 companies operating in a rapidly changing sector in order to purify the items proposed in our questionnaire and to test the degree of influence of the variables in order to carry out a second phase the main survey to analyze the knowledge management practice which aims to capitalize, share and create new knowledge and study its impact on competitiveness among 154 Tunisian companies.

In our survey, we chose companies operating in the "knowledge" sector: the sector employs, relatively and intensely, technology and human capital. We have chosen to retain the services sector that have strong knowledge content and are most affected by technological change. In general, knowledge management is becoming increasingly common in companies where the service dimension is an integral part of the core business (Kalika, 2006).

## 4. Search Results

### 4.1. The study of the Direct Effect of Human Resources on the Approach to Knowledge Management and Competitiveness

Human resources have an impact on the knowledge management process:

Tunisian companies are aware of the need for training (e-training) to create quality knowledge. Thus, training actions at the level of the posts (administrative, technical and management) allow the staff to update the knowledge already acquired in order to reach a new level of knowledge. These findings help to validate previous work in which training is a means and source of knowledge management. The objective of knowledge management (capitalization, sharing and creation of knowledge) is strongly dependent on the contribution of training to the development of new skills. This training makes it possible to distribute tasks between technicians and managers of companies in terms of knowledge: the technician must learn to share knowledge with the members of the company and the manager must develop his capacity for innovation by creating, new knowledge to be able to differentiate itself from the competitors. Thus, creativity and a spirit of cooperation enable, in addition to the improvement of skills, the storage, transfer, combination and sharing of knowledge with the members of the company, in order to create other cognitive resources.

According to a study carried out by Chinese firms, Wang, Su and Yang (2011) argue that "collectivism has a positive effect on the capacity for knowledge creation" and Sandhawalia and Dalcher (2011) Emphasize that collaboration among individuals facilitates problem solving and knowledge sharing.

The need for skills, expressed by companies, is satisfied following the research on the labor market of people who have specific skills to create new knowledge and to render service to the company hired.

In order to manage this knowledge, the knowledge management approach is essential: it is intimately linked to the knowledge, know-how and know-how presented by the new employee, who is called on to enrich and to accumulate the wealth of knowledge of the company.

These results help to validate the work of Ferrary (2010) who considers value creation to be dependent on knowledge workers. These are knowledge workers.

The direct dependence relationship was also studied to determine the degree of significance between the human factor and the competitiveness of the firm. The most significant results of the analysis are as follows:

\* Training is a strategic action for technical staff to learn how to manipulate new software and hardware and help them to increase the stock of knowledge by creating new applications with the aim of presenting new products on the market and higher quality services and subsequently acquire new market shares.

This conclusion helps validate the work of Pavie (2010) on the positive effect of training on improving the competitiveness of the firm, especially for firms that are oriented towards quality competitiveness, according to Ferrary (2010).

\* The competitiveness of the company depends on developing the skills of its human resources. Indeed, the competences of the staff, the capacity to occupy different jobs and the development of a spirit of cooperation are, for the Tunisian companies' sources of

competitive advantages. Moreover, in order to improve the innovation process, accumulated cognitive resources must be managed to transform this knowledge into individual and collective skills to carry out a production activity. Finally, the improvement of innovation, which is essential to ensure the competitiveness of the company, is linked to the adoption of cooperative tools (groupware, workflow), which stimulates the creative action of the actors.

These results contribute to validating the work of Dupuich-Rabasse (2008) on the positive effect of human resources development (competencies) on improving the competitiveness of the company and in particular the work of Ferrary (2010), which considers that human resources can be a strategic resource to foster innovation and supply differentiation necessary for the firm's competitiveness and quality, and the work of Alaoui (2010), who argues that Organizations' organizational capacities (their resources and skills) play a decisive role in the evolution of their competitive advantage.

#### *4.2. Knowledge Management: A Source of Competitive Advantage*

##### 4.2.1. The Practice of Knowledge Management and Cost Reduction

The objective of the knowledge management approach is to contribute to tangible and quantified results that translate into cost reduction. This reduction is closely related not only to knowledge holdings but also to better knowledge management practice. It should be noted that 56.6% of the sample sought to reduce design costs, 17.2% sought to reduce manufacturing costs, 22.2% sought to reduce distribution costs, and 4% Sample seek to reduce the costs of maintenance and optimization of the time factor.

##### 4.2.2. The Practice of Knowledge Management and the Creation of Innovative Projects

To answer the market's demands in terms of innovation, the companies interviewed put in place a knowledge management practice, with two actions: capitalization of knowledge (in order to safeguard memory and collective knowledge to integrate them, in the productive system, resulting in significant competitive advantages) and the creation of new knowledge that refers to the improvement of creative action by the actors in order to engage in the improvement of the innovation process.

These results help to validate the work of Schiuma (2012) and Barbaroux (2012), according to which knowledge management is an innovation-oriented approach that helps companies remain competitive in the market.

##### 4.2.3. The Lack of Integration of Knowledge Management into Company Strategy

Some Tunisian companies do not integrate knowledge management into their strategy. It is considered a secondary activity which may entail additional burdens. These managerial and individual challenges can be a barrier to knowledge sharing, and clear communication of management's vision of the importance of knowledge sharing in organizational strategy is beneficial (Harvey, 2011).

This requires leadership development to manage and communicate the benefits of information sharing and an organizational structure that promotes the flow of knowledge. The human factor alone is not the determining factor in better managing knowledge.

### **5. Knowledge Management and Change Management Approach**

In this research, we designate by culture environment the degree of development of the culture of the net: the use of ICT, the Internet, computerized technologies) and the perception granted by the managers to the practice of knowledge management. This management seems to have positive effects on the quality of the company's knowledge, which determines its position in the market and enables it to develop localization strategies based on the knowledge base, advanced or innovative: Location strategies (9.1% of the sample), specialization (45.5% of the sample) or differentiation (44.4% of the sample).

The development of the culture of the net within the companies in question helps managers to invest in ICT to introduce new production processes and create new knowledge, able to determine the future of the company as a leading company or venture capital. Thus, the culture developed within company's calls for monitoring change and adapting structures to facilitate the exchange and sharing of information. Consequently, the cultural context is dynamic as it is produced and reproduced by the actions of the enterprises and it is, continually, in transformation. Companies must ensure that their adaptation proactively or reactively adapts to the changing conditions of their cultural environment, which necessitates the development of the spirit of cross-sharing: this is where knowledge management has more chance to succeed.

Given this teaching, the practice of knowledge management plays a major role in the development of knowledge of a reproducible nature. Indeed, the perception that the managers of Tunisian companies give to the practice of knowledge management is a variable regulator favoring in the first place the improvement of the process of innovation and creativity and, secondly, the transfer of the information and the sharing of knowledge among the different members of the company to finally obtain significant competitive advantages in terms of the emergence of new highly skilled jobs based on advanced knowledge.

Ferraressi et al (2012) show that knowledge management contributes to the development of new strategies and to the improvement of the innovation process. It must be part of the everyday life of all businesses and be based on an organizational culture that aligns with the strategic objectives of the organization and creates significant tangible results.

### **6. Conclusion**

The knowledge management approach is a process of systematically managing a cognitive process to capitalize, share and create new ones with high added value. Nevertheless, the lack of leadership in communicating the benefits associated with sharing practices, that is, the lack of skilled and skilled specialists to manage knowledge, is an organizational barrier to knowledge sharing within firms

Tunisian. The second barrier is individual, it is the lack of time to manage knowledge: this practice is perceived as an additional burden.

The determinants of business success are, more than ever, dependent on the ability to create and manage rare, inimitable, non-substitutable knowledge and source of wealth to ensure the company's present and future integration into the marketplace. Knowledge management has a direct effect on competitiveness, which can be summarized in the reduction of costs and the improvement of the innovation process. It follows an informal approach that is based on innovative practices in the field of human resources management where it is a question of instilling a new spirit of learning and enhancing skills, mainly through the follow-up of training and meetings development.

The training notes the most important effect on competitiveness in terms of increasing market shares, improving the quality of products and services, stimulating short innovation, a sustainable competitive advantage.

The model of knowledge management by human resources is a reflection tool for the managers of service companies. He stressed the importance of the company acquiring human resources to capitalize, share and create knowledge. It helps focus managers' thinking on the development of knowledge to meet the challenges associated with competitiveness.

Our work, however, has limitations, essentially related to the choices and difficulty of measuring variables in the management of the cognitive process. The effects of the measurability of knowledge to date have not been studied. As a result, other measures could have been taken into account in considering how to capitalize, share and create knowledge. The results obtained should not be generalized since our study concerns only one sector of activity.

In order to overcome these limitations, further studies can be carried out to enrich our research work and can cover a large number of variables, involving other factors such as the technological factor and the organizational factor that can influence the practice of Knowledge management and which have a role in the competitiveness of the company. It might also be interesting to carry out a comparative study with other countries similar or different to Tunisia and to recommend other studies dealing with the same subject but affecting all sectors: a multisectoral study to generalize the results and compare the practice of knowledge management in different sectors of activity.

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