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## Knowledge Management: A Crucial Asset toward a Sustainable Competitive Advantage: Apple Inc. and Samsung Ltd. Teaching Examples

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper aimed at highlighting the key role of knowledge management in transforming a firm into an innovative organization to make it achieve a competitive advantage so as to sustain and survive in today's changing and challenging business environment. Due to products life cycle shortening, the globalization, the technologies revolution era and customers increasingly demanding, the external business environment has become so rapidly changing and challenging that organizations are appealed to react accordingly in order to survive. Thanks to a broad literature review, we found out that many scholars share the same viewpoint according to which, an organizational sustainable competitive advantage in such a hostile and unfriendly environment relies on its ability to innovate, and to that end, an effective knowledge management has been regarded as the core source of innovation within the organization. Organizations like Apple and Samsung deserve to be regarded as teaching examples of knowledge management leading to sustainability. Our conclusion has been made so as to enhance the beliefs of both academic and professional managers in considering knowledge management the crucial asset, not an important asset but a crucial one, toward innovativeness and sustainable competitive advantage.*

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, innovation, competitive advantage, organizational sustainability, Apple Inc., Samsung Ltd

### **1. Introduction**

Succeeding is the goal of any organizations. In fact, successful organization is referred to as an organization that achieved the productivity increase, profits maximization, organizational growth and sustainability through customers' attraction, satisfaction and retention. In other words, the one that creates share value for business owners. Unfortunately, in real life, few companies achieve that goal because it is the outcome of great effort and thorough strategy at both internal and external organizational environments. Companies have to make efforts and strategize because of many challenges they have to face in their day-to-day activities from their external environment among which we identify the competitiveness as the main threat, mostly in today's world where the globalization is speeding as never before, changing the external business environment constantly (Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Nawab et al., 2015; Pittaway et al., 2005). Hence in order to attain the aforementioned successfulness, managers are appealed to overcome those challenges in implementing appropriate strategies that provide the organization with the competitive advantage (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Nawab et al., 2015; Soo et al., 2002). As the development of strategies that competitors cannot copy (Nawab et al., 2015; Rahimli, 2012), competitive advantage enables organizations to defeat competitors while sustaining with regard to such a changing and challenging external environment (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Nawab et al., 2015; Rahimli, 2012). In their work, Dasgupta and Gupta (2009) claimed that, 'the increasing turbulence in the external business environment has focused attention on the resources and organizational capabilities as the principal source of competitive advantage.'

As one of those resources, knowledge management is a keystone in competitive advantage building, through generating innovation within the organization (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Nawab et al., 2015; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018), since a company that does not innovate cannot compete and accordingly cannot survive (Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Rahimli, 2012). Nevertheless, points of view are not the same among authors about this topic, generating many debates. Some support the view with regard to which knowledge management is central to achieving a competitive advantage while others do not share his viewpoint. This work aims to discuss the extent to which the creation, sharing and utilization of knowledge within the organization is central to developing competitive advantage in order to emphasize the importance of knowledge management toward external business environment whereby turbulence and market requirements are constantly increasing. To attain this goal, the paper will describe the competitive advantage and the knowledge management, will establish the link between both concepts and then will provide some examples to support this link, through an appropriate literature review.

## 2. Competitive Advantage

As the external organizational environment is rapidly changing, mostly in this globalization era, the internal organizational environment is appealed to change along with. This internal capability of the firm to change its internal environment so as to respond to or to fit better and quicker the external environment requirements than its competitors characterizes the competitive advantage. Urbancová (2013) states that innovation is a key source of a competitive advantage that determines the economic success of each organization. After reviewing the literature (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Nawab et al., 2015; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018; Pittaway et al., 2005; Qureshi & Ghani, 2015; Rahimli, 2012), we understand and summarize the competitive advantage as the development and exploitation of organization's assets that competitors will take long to copy or will not be able to copy at all. In short, the competitive advantage is the organizational ability to be in advance on its competitors. The aim of the competitive advantage is to enable the firm to succeed and defeat competitors so as to survive and sustain in this changing and challenging external business environment where customers are increasingly demanding. Rahimli (2012) supports that, 'The primary definition of the competitive advantage relies more on putting the organization in the top place of the industry and having power of economics of scale against competitors.' The aforementioned organization's assets can relate to new procedures and processes, lower price of products, and higher quality of products and services as required by the organization's stakeholders (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Nawab et al., 2015; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018). All these reflect the innovation within the organization. Thus, in order to become a competitive firm, the company needs to innovate in terms of processes or products and services.

An organization becomes innovative when it introduces new processes or products and services or when it improves existing processes, products and services. That is why we perceive the innovation as the introduction of something new and useful toward customers, which can be related to products, methods and techniques of production, practices or services (Dasgupta and Gupta, 2009; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018). Only the innovation can make a firm different from competitors and in becoming different, the firm acquires the competitive advantage (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Nawab et al., 2015). Ngoc-Tan & Gregar (2018) support that in an increasingly volatile and competitive business environment, it is imperative for organizations, with their all resources, to put in place systems and processes to ensure the desired outcomes in the interest of all stakeholders. According to Roberts (1988) as cited in Dasgupta and Gupta (2009), four steps are necessary in the process of innovation: (1) Creation, (2) Initial application, (3) Feasibility determination, and (4) Final application. The most important and difficult step is the first one, the creation as the departure spot of innovativeness, requiring managers to collect the appropriate information from both internal and external – mostly – environments, to process and share that information in order to generate innovative ideas, source of competitive advantage. Information collection, process and sharing reflect two organizational resources that have emerged as fostering innovation: Organizational learning and Knowledge management.

## 3. Knowledge Management

Organizational learning and knowledge management are so exceedingly interlinked that we cannot talk about one without another and both drive the firm toward the competitiveness, through innovation (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Hiltunen, 2011; Nawab et al., 2015; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Swan, 2007). More a company is able to learn, more it will acquire new knowledge, more it will increase its innovativeness and competitiveness, more customers will be attracted, satisfied and retained, and more the organization will succeed, defeat competitors and sustain in this changing and demanding business environment. We perceive an organizational learning as an organization involved to a continuous process of updating knowledge so as to create or to improve and upgrade processes or products and services quality or both in a changing business world in order to sustain. Nonaka (1991), as cited in Pittaway et al. (2005), described four steps in learning process: (1) Identification of information and creation of new knowledge, (2) Exchange and diffusion of knowledge, (3) Integration of new knowledge into existing knowledge, and (4) Transformation of new knowledge into action – reflection of innovation. Learning increases and improves knowledge through processing information, which enables organizations to adapt to environment changes and build competences for competitive advantage.

In a strategic management context, knowledge is an input and innovation an output, while the competitive advantage and the organizational sustainability are long-run objectives. In Ngoc-Tan & Gregar (2018), Majchrzak et al. (2004) demonstrated that the knowledge management implementation is a strategy to improve innovation; it is regarded as the best way to enhance innovation. Therefore, we cannot expect innovation without knowledge simply for the reason that innovation aims to respond to both organization and market needs, which needs are assessed and incorporated as knowledge within the organization. Innovation must then be new knowledge-based whether the organization expects to produce products and services that encounter markets requirements and organization's purposes, otherwise it will not make the firm competitive and will not deserve to be named innovation (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Rahimli, 2012; Swan, 2007). Hence, we conceive knowledge management as the organizational ability to generate information (knowledge creation) and to keep everyone within the company informed and aware (knowledge sharing) about Dos and Don'ts (knowledge utilization) in order to acquire the innovativeness, to defeat competitors and to make the firm sustainable. In other words, knowledge management makes the firm acquire the competitive advantage in becoming innovative (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Hasan & Zhou, 2015; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Nawab et al., 2015; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018; Rahimli, 2012; Soo et al., 2002).

Since it is so crucial to the organizational survival, managers must promote the creation, sharing and utilization of knowledge at any levels of the organization. Many organizational features are likely to foster knowledge creation, sharing and utilization (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Hiltunen, 2011; Hope & Mühlemann, 2002; Hultkvist, 2010; Leal-Rodriguez et al,

2013; Nawab et al., 2015; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018; Pittaway et al., 2005; Swan, 2007): confidence and competence of employees, supportive and nurturing environment, incentive schemes and rewards for innovating and sharing knowledge, learning climate and continuous organizational learning, open communication channels, employees involvement in decision making, seamlessly leadership, teamwork, delegation of accountability to lower levels, trust among employees, proximity between employees, susceptibility and readiness to change, care in organizational relationships, cross-functional communication, interaction with and feedback from customers (main source of information about market needs), existence of knowledgebase (organizational memory), knowledge management system, and so on. These features can be regrouped into four big factors influencing knowledge management: (1) organizational culture, (2) organizational structure, (3) information technology, and (4) leadership style. Their contribution to the knowledge creation, sharing and utilization participates to generating competitive advantage for the sake of the company (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Hope & Mühlemann, 2002; Ngoc-Tan & Gregar, 2018; Pittaway et al., 2005).

Competitive advantage implies innovation, while innovation itself implies knowledge management. Ultimately, competitive advantage implies knowledge management. Thus, knowledge management is central to and has a great impact on the acquisition of competitive advantage in the organization. Since a firm cannot compete and survive in today's changing, demanding and challenging business environment without competitive advantage (Dasgupta & Gupta, 2009; Hasan & Zhou, 2015; Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2013; Nawab et al., 2015; Swan, 2007), we can highly and strongly infer that a firm cannot compete and survive in such an environment without knowledge management. Jantunen (2005), as cited in Ngoc-Tan & Gregar (2018), stresses that innovation is a knowledge-based process to create new ideas, markets, products and services toward achieving competitive advantage by satisfying maximum number of customers, which in turns establishes an organization as a brand. From their side, López-Nicolás & Meroño-Cerdán (2011) emphasize that organizations are not aware of the real implications that knowledge management may have on their outcomes and based on an empirical study consisted of 310 Spanish organizations and structural equations modelling, results show that knowledge management strategies impact on innovation and organizational performance directly and indirectly, through an increase on innovation capability. Rahimli (2012) argued that, 'To have a sustainable competitive advantage, an organization should realize how to create, distribute and utilize knowledge through an organization and how attach it to organizational process.' In the same work, he adds, same as Brahma & Mishra (2015), Cerchione & Esposito (2017), Perez-Soltero & Soto (2017), Qureshi & Ghani (2015) and Walecka-Jankowska (2015), that all the background studies say that the relationship between knowledge management and sustainable competitive advantage is highly positive, hence knowledge management is a fundamental, not just important but fundamental principle of competitive advantage.

#### 4. Real-life Examples

##### 4.1. Apple Inc

Apple Inc. is an American multinational corporation established in 1977 by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne, involved to designing, manufacturing and marketing personal computers, mobile communication and media devices, and selling a variety of related software, services, accessories, networking solutions and third-party digital content and applications (Apple, 2017; Braid, 2015). The innovativeness in its production is the main characteristic of the company, which allows the organization to stay up to date with the latest technologies to ensure the competitive ability (Braid, 2015). Based on SWOT analysis, rapid innovation in producing higher quality and superior design products is the main strength of Apple Inc. The CEO of the company stated that, 'we don't settle for anything less than excellence in every group in the company, and we have the self-honesty to admit when we're wrong and the courage to change' (Braid, 2015). In 2017, for instance, the firm invested \$ 11.6 billion into its Research and Development (R&D) center in seeking of innovation (Apple, 2017). Its awareness of market changing needs and competitive environment it is operating in, with competitors such as PC-HP, Dell, Acer, Samsung and so on, is the source of its commitment to innovating so as to achieve a competitive advantage (Apple, 2017; Braid, 2015).

The aforementioned awareness of the market changing needs and the competitive environment is the result of what the company calls *Environment Scanning*, allowing Apple Inc. on one hand, to gain business intelligence by tracking systematically its customers and the use of its products, in order to obtain information from feedback systems and to make adjustments to its products quality and design, and on another hand, to get informed about competitors' products introduced into the market in order to improve its own inputs and outputs, and therefore achieve a competitive advantage (Apple, 2017; Braid, 2015). The information acquired constitutes the starting spot of the creation of knowledge that will be embedded, shared and utilized within the company, so as to improve its processes, products and services, and to stay innovative. Thereby, the environmental scanning generates the knowledge which, once well-managed, fosters the innovation. In other words, without that environment scanning, focal source of knowledge, the company would be like blind and would not be able to innovate at all.

The knowledge management and innovative policy have been existing over years in Apple's corporate governance. Since 1980s, Apple has successfully used the differentiation strategy to separate its products in the market from those of other competitors, starting with its computers *Macintosh*, its music players *iPod* and smart phones *iPhone* (Braid, 2015). Thanks to its innovativeness, Apple has survived over around 44 years now, despite the environmental threats, changes and challenges, and is still increasingly spreading worldwide and attracting customers. The corporate has become a multinational enterprise, with locations in America, Africa, Europe, Asia and Oceania (Apple, 2017). Over decades, Apple has built a broad range of loyal customers attracted by higher quality and superior design products of the firm and are always available and ready, waiting to purchase the brand-new product brought into the market. Apple calls this the *Brand Loyalty* (Braid, 2015). This achieved competitive advantage makes Apple a difficult competitor for other

companies to compete with and to defeat in the technology market in terms of products high quality. According to its 2012 first quarter report, Apple sold 37.04 million iPhones, 15.43 million iPads, 5.2 million iMacs, 15.4 million iPods and recorded \$ 46.33 billion as revenue and \$ 13.06 billion as net profit. The same year, Apple has been voted, for the fifth year consecutively, the overall winner of the *2012 CMO Survey Award* for its marketing strategies (Braidy, 2015). Such successful course and sustainable competitive advantage of the corporation are the results of its ability to manage knowledge to innovation ends.

#### 4.2. Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.

Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd. (SEC), one of many components of Samsung Group, was established on January 13, 1969 in Korea. It is divided into 4 business divisions that operate independently: Consumer Electronics (CE), Information Technology & Mobile communication (IM), Device Solutions (DS), and Harman International Industries, Inc. and its subsidiaries (Harman) (Samsung, 2018). There is so much to say about SEC divisions that we prefer to focus on one division, Consumer Electronics for accurate illustrations and best understanding. This division produces televisions (core product), refrigerators, freezers, washing machines, air-conditioners, and so on. The division is leading the global digital era by continuously offering new products with innovative technologies, unique design, and enhanced value propositions (Samsung, 2018). The company is characterized by its anticipative innovativeness. In other words, the company does not undergo the market changes, but rather, provokes those changes in introducing new and innovating products that anticipate customers' needs. While they are still consuming and enjoying a recent Samsung product, customers are always, in an unforeseen way, surprised by the introduction of another brand-new and higher generation Samsung product that they were not expecting into the market. This matches what Tushman and Nadler (1986) stressed, as cited in Urbancová (2013), that, 'Organizations can gain competitive advantage only by managing effectively for today while simultaneously creating innovation for tomorrow.'

In 2009, they created the world's first *LED TV* and just in the first quarter of 2010, while customers were still enjoying the new *LED TV*, without waiting, they launched the world's first 3D Total Solution, offering a *3D TV*, Blue-ray player, home theater and glasses in one package. Again, later in the same year, they launched Samsung Apps, the world's first app store for smart TVs and added various smart services in 2011, consolidating Samsung status, leader in smart TVs. In 2012, they developed content that can be accessed via new input methods based on voice/gesture (smart interaction), thus improving services that every family member can enjoy. In 2013, they released *UHD TVs*, offering superior image quality and resolution compared to previous models. By launching a new *Curved TV* form factor in 2014 and the first Nano-crystal technology *SHUD TV* (quantum dot) in 2015, Samsung bolstered its leadership in the premium market. In 2016, by introducing *second generation Quantum dot* and *HDR 1000 technologies*, Samsung raised the bar for image quality higher than ever before. Although all these creations, the firm never stopped thinking of innovative ideas. In 2017, they created a new category with *QLED TVs*, which offer 100% color volume and perfect color expression, allowing viewers to realize the ultimate image quality of TVs. In 2018, Samsung was planning, while customers were still consuming QLED TVs, to introduce other innovative products, such as *8K ultra-definition QLED TVs* that increase resolution fourfold from existing UHD standards and expand TVs boundaries. This unbeatable and uncatchable innovativeness with its sustainable competitive advantage enabled Samsung to maintain the top position in the overall TV market for thirteen straight years since 2006, and to produce record-high financial results, with KRW 224 trillion as revenue and KRW 59 trillion as operating profit, for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2018 (Samsung, 2018).

In the center of this higher extent of innovativeness and sustainable competitive advantage, is the hard work of the company's R&D department. Its mission goes beyond the simple fact of collecting and appraising customers' feedbacks and needs in order either to improve the quality of existing processes, products and services or to produce new ones that encounter their needs or both. It got a bigger mission than that, aiming to anticipate customers' needs and requirements by creating, sharing and utilizing innovative ideas (new knowledge) within the whole organization. Therefore, it is not customers' needs that are influencing Samsung's production, but rather Samsung that is influencing its customers by thinking in advance in their shoes and taking them toward their future needs. This is a perfect model of a learning organizational, where knowledge is the epicenter of strategic management in the search of competitive advantage and organizational sustainability to survive in such a rapidly changing and challenging external business environment.

## 5. Conclusion

External environment is really determining in business world and has become rapidly changing and challenging, mostly with the coming of globalization. To survive in such conditions, organizations are appealed to change along with their external environment. This change implies identifying the information (market needs), which creates the knowledge that must be shared and utilized so as to encounter market needs and requirements by either improving existing processes, products and services or producing brand-new innovating products and services. This reflects knowledge management, compulsory to innovation process (first step). Innovation is an important component for an organization wishing to acquire competitive advantage and survive in the business environment. By promoting innovation, knowledge is then a set of Dos and Don'ts generated and implemented in order to make a firm achieve the competitive advantage. Since the competitive advantage enables a company to survive before external threats, knowledge management is thereby considered a weapon that the organization must hold to become innovative and sustainable. In other words, knowledge creation, sharing and utilization are critically central to competitive advantage achievement and a keystone to organizational innovativeness, competitiveness and sustainability accordingly, while turbulence is more and more increasing in the external business environment.

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