Gen Inertia: How to overcome it?

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ABSTRACT

Information is vital for organizations to maintain competitive advantage in complex, challenging environments. Information (or Gen) is generated from many aspects of learning, project work, data analysis, new assignments, or, from research and development work that adds to the already existing organizational knowledge bank. From Francis Bacon to Hayek, most scholars and philosophers have acknowledged the power and utility of knowledge. Knowledge is essential for workforces to adapt to new, challenging work environments. There is a substantial amount of literature devoted primarily to managerial learning at workplace, and in organizations. However, research devoted to the obstacles of employee (workforce) learning and education at workplace is still lagging behind the literature on managerial learning. This paper concentrates on idiosyncratic features of workforce learning, and introduces the concept of “gen inertia”—an aspect of knowledge inertia— which acts as a binding constraint to effective learning in organizations. The concept of knowledge inertia (KI) is not new, and this work builds upon the previous work done by Shu-hsien Liao (2002), to derive a new concept of Gen Inertia (GI). Workforces bring in new knowledge, as well as they generate new information which they apply in their daily job routines. They also gain knowledge from learning-by-doing that contributes to their evolving skillsets. However, it has been observed that employees often use stale, outdated, stagnant knowledge (which is the old knowledge that they already have), to deal with new emerging problems. The reasons seems to be manifold: e.g., lack of proper means of support for employees to continue learning, lack of educational infrastructures, resources and manpower, or deficiency of motivating factors which fails to stimulate learning under organizational (business) environment. While employees fall behind in their learning curve, their attempt to apply whatever existing knowledge they already have to deal with new emergent problems, takes a toll on their overall performance, efficiency, and creativity. Besides, there are numerous auxiliary factors which hinders workforce learning that prevents them from absorbing new, current information. All these factors contribute to the concept of “Gen inertia”—or, inertia of learning (IoL) (an aspect of knowledge inertia) in organizations. The goal of this paper is to underscore this emerging problem and advocate effective solutions to deal with the problem of gen inertia in learning organizations.

Keywords: Gen inertia (GI), knowledge inertia (KI), workforce education, organizational learning

JEL Classification Code: D21, D23

Introduction

The definition of knowledge inertia (KI) was raised by Liao (2002). This paper derives a new concept from the old theory of knowledge inertia (KI): Gen inertia (GI), and provides a conceptual framework for understanding the theory of gen inertia (GI). From an evolutionary perspective, knowledge is contemporaneous with the evolution of learning, observation, experimentation, intelligence, innovation, and creativity. Organizations require new knowledge for creativity and innovation, and there is a link between learning and organizational performance (Hernaus et al 2008, Cater & Cater 2009). Also, several authors found strong relationship between organizational learning and organizational innovation (Tushman & Nadler, 1996, Calantone et al., 2002). The importance of knowledge, and hence knowledge management in
organizations cannot be underestimated (Jelenic, 2011). This is one of the primary reasons why organizations assume learning and knowledge management seriously, is reflected in their behavior; i.e., the time, effort, and resources they put behind their workforces to train and educate them reinforces the core foundation of organizational learning. New information from learning adds to organizational memory (Huber, 1991) (existing knowledge), modifies the existing knowledge, or replaces the old memory with new knowledge. Knowledge is also generated from new projects, new ventures or assignments. To be noted, human development in organization parallels with organizational development and growth, if such fruits of development (intellectual capital) is guided and managed in a precise manner. In other words, human development is reflected in organizational operations and organizational performance. Since workforce constitutes one of the prime edifices of a firm, business, or an organization, an educated and intelligent workforce is a valuable asset of every knowledge organization. This corroborates to the growing interest in organizational learning, organizational knowledge, and memory (Spender, 1996).

Hence, education of workforces in organizations is as essential component of organizational culture. One of the most important roles of a knowledge manager is to oversee smooth and effective learning in organizations. Besides, a knowledge manager should be well adept in identifying and moderating constraints on learning, and removing any obstacles thereof (Chatterjee, 2014).

**Concept of Gen Inertia:**

Workplace learning in business organizations has now become one of the most important aspects of organizational culture (Hatun, 2013, Serrat, 2010). Workforces learn and gain knowledge while at work. Since knowledge is considered as the key to innovation, competition and organizational success, learning imparts both practical and theoretical knowledge to the workforces. Learning also helps to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge which is a useful knowledge in practice. To appreciate organizational learning, it is necessary to take into account different forms of knowledge; e.g., tacit, explicit, individual, and collective knowledge (Swart and Pye 2003). In effect, Constantin Bratianu (2015) defines different forms and categories of knowledge, besides the conventional tacit and explicit forms of knowledge. These are in the tune of cognitive knowledge, emotional knowledge, etc. One important advantage of organizational learning is to enable the conversion of tacit knowledge into useful collective knowledge. Workforce education is hence an indispensable facet of individual and group (collective) cognitive development.

Workforce learning at workplace (Billett, 2004) constitutes a fundamental characteristic of overall organizational growth and individual progress. It is an evolutionary process wherein agents (employees) adapt to new environments, learn new things, adopt new routines, and work as a unit to achieve efficiency at work which also tends to increase employee productivity over the time. In similar tune, it has been assumed that the dynamic capabilities of a firm are shaped by the co-evolution of learning mechanisms (Zollo & Winter, 2001). Learning empowers workforces with knowledge about the system, process, and practice. This knowledge could be anything; e.g., facts, information, data, statistics etc. Knowledge and information are synonymously called “Gen”— info, facts, and awareness about particular process, method, or practices. Agents gain “gen” from learning and doing. While employees (agents) learn by doing work, they also face various challenges at workplace; those challenges also include barriers and constraints to sustained learning. Organizations more recently have adopted sustainable learning programs aimed at employee empowerment in the long run. Learning is a cognitive behavior which enables learners to absorb, explore, retain, recall and analyze information or facts—“Gen”. Continuous learning maintains the gen momentum wherein agents gain knowledge, whilst apathy towards learning induces gen inertia, where agents “lose” knowledge (forget many things that they might have learned). One of the most important goals of organizational education of the workforce is to maintain the “gen momentum” and avert “gen inertia”—the inertia of knowledge
acquisition. Advantage of gen momentum may present as a double-edged sword; i.e., it empowers workforce with essential knowledge while at the same time increases organization’s knowledgebase.

Further, since organizations grow intellectually and expand their knowledge-base, employees should unlearn inaccurate, outdated information (Gary & Grover, 1999) and learn new information (new gen).

In What Respect Gen Inertia (GI) Differs from Knowledge Inertia (KI)?

Shu-hsien Liao’s (2002) theory of knowledge inertia explores KI as a concept of knowledge management from the perspective of an indicator that enables or inhibits an organization's or an individual's ability on problem solving. The concept was mainly focused on problem solving skills, whereas, the concept of Gen Inertia (GI) is a holistic approach that focusses on overall cognitive development and progress of an individual in an organization. However, it is also true that Liao has mentioned about overall cognitive development of the workforce, but it was on the context of problem solving. Workforces are engaged in various sorts of knowledge work; i.e., not just in problem solving. Employees are active in data analysis, data management, R&D activities, innovation drive, marketing, sales, technical jobs, and creativity. It is not the fact that Shu-hsien Liao did not include all these aspects of KM in his framework; in fact he did include some of these aspects. However, this research deals with a new aspect of KI— broad-spectrum (learning) and cognitive enhancement of the workforce, and conceptualizes an all-inclusive framework beyond knowledge-based architecture which Liao proposed. This research not only emphasizes the importance of learning in organizations, but provides groundwork to further investigate how and why knowledge workers should maintain the “gen momentum” and avoid gen inertia, while being part of a learning organization.

It has been observed that although organizations support and promote learning, many employees fail to take advantage of it. The aim of workforce education is to train employees and educate them with up-to-date knowledge about their occupations. Human resource development (HRD) programs in place in learning organizations connect employees with educational platforms using e-learning modules with IT-enabled support systems, in-house continual education modules and other modes of organizational learning in order to enhance their skills, efficiency, and productivity. Emerging digital technologies provide opportunities and platforms for e-learning through web-enabling technologies (Gunasekaran et al 2002) which allow flexible learning opportunities for the employees. Different modes of learning are being experimented to stimulate employee creativity. Goal oriented team learning behavior contributes to workforce creativity which is an important source of competitive advantage and innovation (Fang et al, 2011). As knowledge is one of the key aspects of competition (besides strategy), a competitive workforce is an asset to every organization. However, the most important aspect of learning is through motivation— since a demotivated, disinterested employees fail to appreciate the essence of organizational learning. Moreover, there are many constraining factors as there are as many barriers which are demotivating to learning employees. Some organizational cultures support and stimulate learning, while others inhibit workforce education. Moderation of ‘organizational constraints to learning’ supports a learning environment which is conducive to effective employee education. According to some scientific studies (Kessels and Roberto, 2009, Raichle, 1994), learning may lead to physiological changes in brain synapses while changes in behavior likely depends on strengthening or weakening of brain synapses, which may result in evolutionary adaptation (Chatterjee, 2010) of the individual. So it might be possible to measure the amount of “behavioral change” which occurs following learning. Or, it may be possible to measure learning capability among workforce (Chiva et al. 2007) that contributes to such behavioral changes. However, behavioral changes
also occur “without” learning as well, because not everybody learns, yet evidences of change can be discerned.

The biological aspects of learning nevertheless ensues the behavioral aspects of learning, whilst the adaptive behavioral learning-induced evolutionary change (Chatterjee, 2010) in agents’ overall social interaction and communication is an important indicator of employee education. However, learning requires time and patience; learning is furthermore taxing for the blue-collar employees in organizations who are already preoccupied with job-related tasks. Allocation of time for learning beyond routine work is a big concern for some of the employees, since learning in corporate environments and business organizations is different from that of learning in schools and universities. At the universities, learners come only to study whereas internal assessment of employees in an organization is different from that of a student at a university. Nonetheless, in organizations, employees have tight work-schedules and routines since they come to work and earn their wages. Even if they manage to find some recess, employees still require proper guidance and mentorship to conceptualize what that has been taught. Continual education programs have now become the norm of many organizations that excel in quality assurance. The fact that organizational learning increases organization’s knowledgebase is well recognized, which also increases workforce knowledge. Today, knowledge workers excel in information processing, research and development work, and data mining. Demand for knowledge workers who are creative and detail-oriented is immense, but the supply falls short in developing nations. Such demand for an educated workforce is justified, since an educated workforce is an engine of idea generation.

Besides these challenging issues, learning becomes tedious for some employees and many of them opt out of organizational educational programs. Others who appreciate and embrace organizational learning often find it difficult to comprehend the subject matter, or the instruction materials, or both. Further, they may find it difficult due to faulty instructional design and incompetent mentors who make the subject-matter of learning more difficult and less interesting for the learners. For learning to be effective, the subject matter should be motivating, inspiring, stimulating, and thought-provoking.

What is the value of organizational learning?

The value of organizational learning is related to the Successful learning depends on self-discipline and enthusiasm as much as on the quality of mentorship (Allen et al, 2006). Quality of corporate instructors defines the quality of learning, and hence the real value of education in organizations (Brecka and Rubach, 1995). Knowledge-workers need to be constantly updated about the recent trends and technologies, about markets and the economy, and they ought to gain insight into technical aspects of the job. Workforce education provides the opportunities to learn at workplaces. Hence, the instruction materials should be tailored for different categories of employees at different levels of learning. The real value of organizational learning is value creation wherein knowledge benefits individuals, their colleagues and eventually, the organization. There are many theories of organizational and individual learning, which however, is not the current topic of this research.

One of the primary goals of this forthcoming title is to address the problem of learning and cognitive (inertial) stagnation—which can be modeled as the theory of gen inertia, too often faced by blue-collar workforces; i.e., those who belong to the bottom-line in an organization. It is the ground-level staff who mostly struggle with learning, and fall prey to the perils of gen inertia. The concept of ‘gen inertia’ and ‘gen momentum’ can be explained in terms of Nonaka’s knowledge dynamics (Nonaka, 1994). That is, in order to support efficient knowledge creation and information processing capabilities, organizations should have conducive or favorable
environments. Favorable environments not only support learning, but they also lead to organization-wide adaptation and adoption of learning practices. Organizations should also have some values that breed desire to learn, and boast information related behaviors that facilitate learning (Sinkula et al., 1997). This is particularly relevant to knowledge workers in learning, market-oriented organizations. However, as small ideas can make a huge difference for small, growing organizations, Robinson and Schroeder (2004) emphasized on the importance of idea generation. Idea generation require sharing of information, learning, and engagement of employees towards knowledge generation. The path of evolution in employee learning is much related to the path of organizational growth. As employees gather more knowledge and technical expertise, it is transferred to the organizational memory, thus adding to the organization’s existing knowledge base. Furthermore, the pathway to organized evolution of employees in course of learning processes have been explained by Nonaka et al (2001), and the behavioral aspects of organizational adaptation by Chatterjee (2010).

It shall be kept in mind that any hindrance or obstacles to effective organizational learning would likely affect the learning curve of the employees. Andreas Riege (2005) has discussed several knowledge-sharing barriers to effective organizational learning, and how to overcome them. According to the author, knowledge-sharing barriers are difficult to identify and measure. Hence, in a knowledge-driven economy, barriers to knowledge-sharing must be identified, and obliterated to enable dissemination of information. One cannot learn without information or observation. Introduction of new technologies demand learning whereas knowledge provide ideas about new technology; i.e., they are complementary. Constraints and obstacles to effective workforce learning may lead to cognitive inertia or “Gen Inertia”: Gen herein refers to “knowledge”, and gen inertia refers to “knowledge inertia”— sluggishness, decay, or failure to gain new knowledge (Liao et al, 2008). Gen inertia may be one of the significant reasons of high job turnover rates, or the syndrome of job hopping seen among some employees, since, employers are reluctant to keep incumbent employers who are not receptive to learning, not creative, less adaptive, or are inexperienced. Also, the rise in job turnover is a big concern for employers, as Bishop (1998) states that employers are often reluctant to hire unskilled employees and train them. However, this situation is changing fast, as the demand for knowledge workers grows exponentially, employers and organizations are willing to impart education and in-house training by creating better learning infrastructures, training modules, and hiring expert mentors to educate the workforce on the job.

Conclusion:

For the reasons discussed above, employees should continue learning to stay abreast of technical advancements and innovations at workplace and beyond. They should avoid the trap of “gen inertia”, or, knowledge inertia (Wang & Yang, 2013) and maintain some degree of gen momentum which would enable them to gradually adapt to the changing nature of organizational dynamics, and job requirement of the organization. If employees quit learning, they risk forgetting what has been taught previously as much as they would likely fall back on their learning curve. Management should identify constraining factors which their employees face and try to remove obstacles wherever possible to enable employees to learn and apply knowledge effectively. This pertains to the concept of putting knowledge managers and corporate educators in the epicenter of reform, so that they can lead with example and create motivating environments within organizations for workforce education and learning.
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