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ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES AND CAPABILITIES FOR KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY IN HIGH VELOCITY ENVIRONMENTS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF BUSINESS STRATEGY ALIGNMENT

K.UMA LAKSHMI
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
ALLIANCE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
ALLIANCE UNIVERSITY
BANGALORE

DR. SUMITHA K
VISITING FACULTY
CMRIT
BANGALORE

ABSTRACT

Knowledge is perceived as one of the firm's most important resources and arguments are put forward that differences in knowledge resources or in the capability to create and renew them are the major determining factors of the firm's competitive advantage. Modern strategic management theories like Resource Based View (RBV) proposed that Resources that are Valuable, Rare, imperfectly imitable and Non-substitutable (VRIN) are the sources of firm's competitive advantage while Dynamic Capabilities Framework(DCF) insisted on renewal of resources and reconfiguring them into new capabilities from time to time for attaining sustainable competitive advantage. Knowledge Based View (KBV) extended RBV by placing knowledge as a specialized organizational resource. Yet, in practice, knowledge is seen more as an outcome of Information systems rather than strategic resource. Since competitive advantage is short lived in competition-intensive high velocity environments, knowledge strategy that works around knowledge related resources and capabilities needs constant renewal and has to be aligned with business strategy so as to ensure sufficient knowledge resource for strategic intent. Knowledge management capability follows knowledge strategy. This paper is to review and examine the organizational resources and capabilities of knowledge strategy namely organizational culture, organization learning, flexible Information infrastructure and knowledge management capability that can be aligned with business strategy. Consequently, the study proposes a comprehensive conceptual model for knowledge and business strategy alignment for high velocity environments. The importance of this research is reflected in the fact that the alignment of knowledge-business strategies has an impact on maintaining and improving its competitive position.

KEYWORDS

business strategy, competitive advantage, dynamic capabilities, knowledge management, knowledge strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

High velocity environments are characterized by extensive globalization, limited barriers to entry, high competition (Dutta & Segev, 1999), rapid use of Social Media, Mobility, Analytics & Cloud technologies (SMAC) along the value chain, information transparency & near-zero information search costs resulting in bargaining power of customers & suppliers and in turn resulting in economic uncertainties. In times when uncertainty is the only certainty, it is critical for businesses to assess the resource and capability base from time to time so as to remain competitive. Renewal of existing resource base and reconfiguring them into new capabilities on a continuous basis, explains the source of competitive advantage for firms in moderately competitive environments (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece et al., 1997). Knowledge is perceived as firm's one of the most important resources and arguments are put forward that differences in knowledge resources or in the ability to create and renew them are the major determining factors of the firm's sustainable competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1992). To establish competitive advantage that can be sustainable, it is not sufficient enough to have efficient access to internal and external information sources alone. Knowledge strategy has to reflect the integration of new information as well as learning from past experiences with organization's existing knowledge base. This new knowledge has to be operationalized into renewal of production routines. It has been found that production/ operations routines allow firms to accumulate capabilities (Nelson and Winter, 1982) which, over a period of time, may transform into competencies that allow a particular firm to gain competitive advantage due to the inimitable basis upon which competencies are formed. Hence, managing knowledge continuously from information sources and experience is critical for firm's competitive advantage. Most of the organizations do not possess well developed strategic models linking knowledge-oriented processes, technologies, and business strategy. Some organizations do have a knowledge strategy, but without adequate fit with organizational strategy (Zack, 1999). This necessitates alignment of knowledge strategy and business strategy (Asoh, 2003). There is dearth of knowledge management models for the context of corporate executives (Earl, 2001) and proven knowledge management strategies (Asoh, 2003). The learning paradoxes of - taking advantage of existing capabilities and routines, while continually innovating; and transferring learning within the firm, while disallowing imitation by competitors - are the major dilemmas faced by managers (Vera and Crossan, 2004) for competitive advantage in data driven high velocity environments.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The paper is organized around two primary research questions

1. In high velocity environments, what intent forms the basis for aligning knowledge strategy with business strategy?
2. As part of knowledge strategy (not knowledge management strategy), which organizational resource - capability combinations lead to sustained competency in high velocity environments when aligning with business strategy?

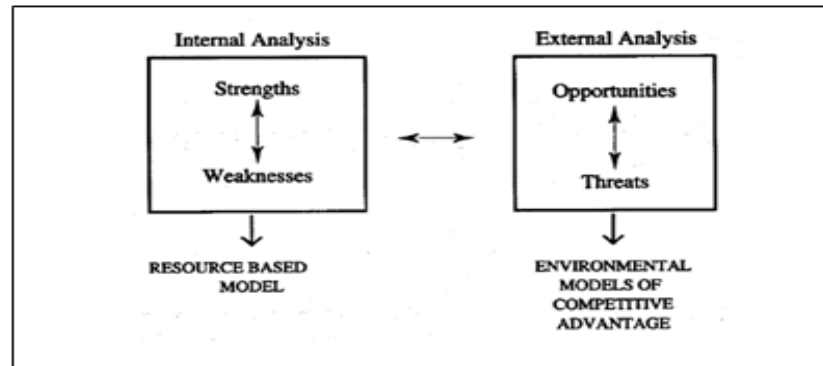
There have been questions regarding whether competitive advantage can be sustained in high velocity environments (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000) since "Tomorrow's competitors do not even register on most firms' radar screens" (D'aveni, 1998). There are apprehensions too regarding strategic value of knowledge resource (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). In that case, Knowledge Strategy process has to align its resources and capabilities to support business strategy. As a subset of knowledge strategy, knowledge management process focuses on current knowledge gaps as opposed to future requirements, utilizing the unit level or firm level resources. Knowledge strategy has to aim at maximizing knowledge management capability. Firms with high KM capabilities in a key area can respond very quickly to strategic moves by competitors (Gold et al., 2001). Exploring the linkage between different dimensions of knowledge strategy and competitive advantage helps to model the alignment mechanisms that will support the business strategy in exploiting existing knowledge stores.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, it discusses the theoretical background of Resource-Capability-Competency model of Resource Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Framework. Secondly it attempts to position knowledge in RBV context with Knowledge Based View. And finally, resources and capabilities related to knowledge strategy namely knowledge management capability, organizational learning, organization culture and flexible information infrastructure are examined in the context of business strategy alignment literature to arrive at a conceptual model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic process is complex and dynamic (Mintzberg, 1990) and many economic theories and models have been proposed and practiced for organizational performance and competitiveness. The industrial and organization (IO) model proposed that firm's competitiveness is a function of the characteristics of the environment in which it operates. This is extended by Porter in the "five forces" model with consideration of industry competitors, suppliers, buyers, substitutes, and potential industry entrants with advocacy for the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) for maintaining a basic competitive advantage, either through low cost or product differentiation in narrow or broad target markets (Porter, 1980; Porter, 1985). While these are exogenous in nature focusing primarily on external environmental analysis (Lamb, 1984), early 1990s witnessed proliferation of endogenous theories of firm strategy that stressed on internal resource and capability analysis (See Fig. 1) for competitive advantage (Barney, 1995).

FIGURE 1: SWOT ANALYSIS



Source: Porter, 1980

2.1. RESOURCE-CAPABILITY-COMPETENCY MODELS

Modern strategic management theories have explained that the differences in firms' performance are due to continuous renewal of sources of competitive advantage. They have differentiated resources and capabilities from competency. Firm resources include all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc. controlled by a firm (Daft, 1983). Essentially these are the strengths for conceiving and implementing strategies (Porter, 1985). Further studies have distinguished capabilities from resources. A capability is the organizational ability to execute production and daily operations repetitively, efficiently, and predictably. Contrary to this, a competency refers to a company's ability to improve its performance continuously. A competency is the source of differentiation for the company for offering unique products, services, and solutions to customers. Established companies possess many more capabilities than competencies while new companies may have more competencies and fewer capabilities. To penetrate markets, resources, capabilities and competencies must be aligned effectively. Resource Based View (RBV) theorizes that Resources that are Valuable, Rare, Imperfectly-imitable and Non-substitutable (VRIN) by themselves or in combinations lead to competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991) while sustainable competitive advantage needs continuous reconfiguring of resources to develop distinct dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997). This finding is in line with Prahalad & Hamel's core competencies. Core competencies that comprise distinct skills and technologies are difficult for competitors to imitate (Prahalad and Hamel, 1999).

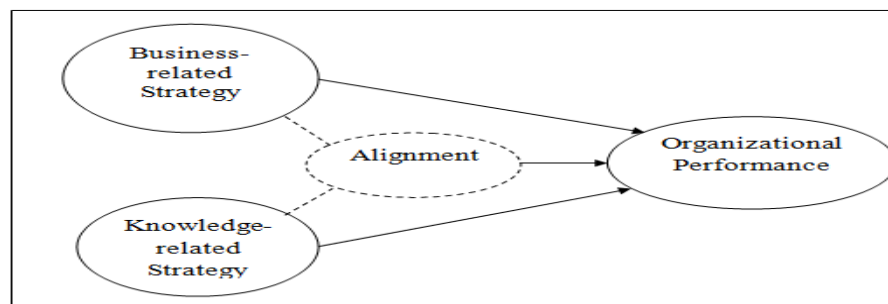
2.2. KNOWLEDGE BASED VIEW (KBV)

Based on the same philosophy as the RBV of the firm, the knowledge-based view (KBV) model of the firm has emerged focusing on knowledge as a specialized organizational resource. As "justified true belief", knowledge is unambiguous and easily transferable Construct (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Earlier theories considered codified knowledge as organizational knowledge and that the knowledge is held by select individuals. Information systems perspective considers organizations as information processing machines for interdependent work and environmental uncertainty (Santos, 1999; Eisenhardt, 2000). Then there is distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962) and both are deemed to be key resources for production (Drucker, 1994). Tacit knowledge is linked to the individual, and is very difficult to articulate like intuitions, unarticulated mental models, or embodied technical skills while Explicit knowledge is meaningful set of information articulated in clear language including numbers or diagrams (Polanyi, 1962). Tacit dimension of Knowledge is a potentially significant resource to the firm as it may possess valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable characteristics (Grant, 1996; Barney, 1991; Kogut and Zander, 1992) and provides core competences (Prahalad, C.K. and G. Hamel, 1999). Knowledge is described as dynamic, as it is created in social interactions amongst individuals and organizations (See Fig. 3) (Nonaka et al., 1994) and forms basis for firm's dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1999) leading to sustainable competitive advantage (Alavi and Leidner, 1999; Grant, 1996). Since Tacit knowledge can get lost due to employee separation, transforming individual knowledge into organizational knowledge is one of the key management objectives (Kovacic et al., 2006; Rasula et al., 2012; Garvin, 1997). As a result, many organizations got engaged in multi-faceted activities collectively called as knowledge management (KM) to be competitive while coping with unpredictable business environments and shorter business cycles.

2.3. KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY- BUSINESS STRATEGY ALIGNMENT

Organizational effectiveness is driven by the "fit" among organizational processes and strategic decisions and thus contributes to competitive advantage (Quinn and Baily, 1994). Knowledge strategy is a set of guidelines and beliefs that shape an organization's manipulation of knowledge resources and capabilities (Kasten, 2007) that might include identification, development, storage, management, retrieval, usage, and disposal of knowledge. Knowledge strategy is different from Knowledge Management (KM) strategy. KM strategy is the action taken by an organization to manage its knowledge. Knowledge management systems place knowledge strategy as the guiding principle. Basic drivers for creating knowledge strategy are: internally vs. externally sourced knowledge, enhanced vs. new knowledge, fast vs. slow speed of learning, and depth vs. breadth of knowledge base resulting in four generic knowledge strategies: explorer, exploiter, imitator, and passive learner (Bierly, 1999).

FIGURE 2: STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT MODEL



Source: Asoh, 2004

A Knowledge Strategy specifies how specific knowledge services will be implemented to bridge the gap between an organization's current knowledge capabilities and the capabilities needed to accomplish its strategic objectives. It also outlines opportunities for exploiting existing knowledge stores. The idea of a knowledge strategy is an attempt to relate an organization's competitive strategy with its intellectual resources & capabilities so as to provide knowledge required for offering products or services in ways superior to those of competitor (Bierly and Chakrabarti, 1999; Zack, 1999). At strategic level, knowledge has to ensure sufficiency of knowledge required to execute firm's strategic intent and gap analysis has to be done between existing knowledge and required knowledge (Zack, 1999). A knowledge strategy provides a link between the organization's strategic decisions and its knowledge structures & activities (Kasten, 2007). This infers that for each type of knowledge strategy there should be fit between strategic actions and other organizational practices & systems (Cabrera and Bonache, 1999). Thus The alignment between knowledge strategy and business strategy is an antecedent to predict organizational performance (See Fig 2) (Ulrich,1998).

P1: Alignment of knowledge strategy and business strategy positively impacts firm's competitive advantage.

2.4. DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY

2.4.1. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM) CAPABILITY

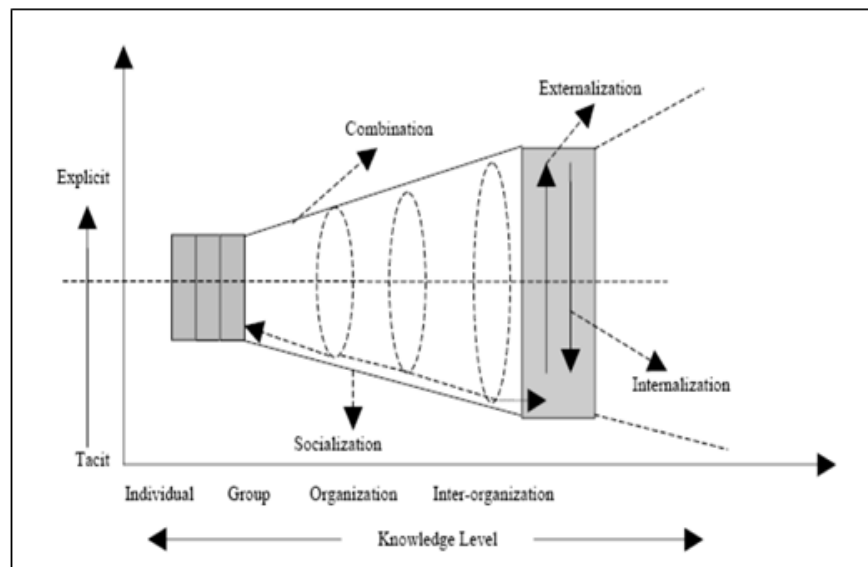
Knowledge Management (KM) is a systematic process for capturing and communicating knowledge that people can use and it is the ability to mobilize and deploy KM-based resources in combination with other resources and capabilities (Chuang, 2004). KM practices are found to have positive impact on organizational performance (Kiessling et al., 2009; Rasula et al., 2012) through innovation, product improvement and employee improvement (Darroch, 2005; Kiessling et al., 2009; Fugate et al., 2009; Mostafa et al., 2011). Leveraging KM resources to create unique KM capabilities determines a firm's overall effectiveness (Gold et al., 2001). The perspective that knowledge is slowly becoming the most important factor of production, next to labour, land and capital (Sher and Lee 2004; Sveiby,1997) has led to the development and implementation of knowledge management (KM) strategies (Earl, 2001). Combining the tacit-internal-oriented and explicit-external-oriented KM strategies indicates a complementary relationship, which implies synergistic effects of KM strategies on performance (Choi and Lee, 2002). Studies have highlighted leadership, culture, technology and best practice measurements as critical success factors for efficient KM implementation (Asoh et. al. 2002).

P2: Knowledge management capability has positive significant effect on competitive advantage.

2.4.2. ORGANIZATION CULTURE

Cultural KM resource, such as appropriate culture encourages employees to create and share knowledge within an organization (Holsaple and Joshi, 2001). The dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation contains tacit and explicit knowledge types mutually complementing in individual or group human creative activities (See Fig.3). These interactions are socialization (from individual tacit knowledge to group tacit knowledge), externalization (from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge), combination (from separate explicit knowledge to systemic explicit knowledge), and internalization (from explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge) (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka et al., 1996). Tacit knowledge development is dependent on other interpersonal relationships which may take years to develop (Mata et al., 1995) and tend to be highly local or organization specific (Sambamurthy and Zmud, 1992; Choi and Lee, 2002). Simultaneous management of both tacit and explicit knowledge is important for the organization (Nevis et al., 1995; Jordan and Jones, 1997). Combination of degrees of managing explicit and explicit knowledge as low and high in a two by two matrix, obtained four KM styles – passive, system-oriented, human-oriented and dynamic. Dynamic KM Style (high explicit-oriented and high tacit -oriented KM activities) could lead to higher corporate performance (Choi and Lee, 2002). An organization is conceptualized as an organic Ba (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003) rather than information processing machine. Ba is a shared context in motion, can transcend time, space, and organization boundaries resulting in new conceptual artifacts and structures for interaction providing for possibilities and constrain the entities in consequent knowledge creation cycles (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003). The results of the study conducted by Zheng et al.(2010) suggest that KM fully mediates the impact of organizational culture on organizational effectiveness.

FIGURE 3: KNOWLEDGE CONVERSION IN ORGANIZATION



Source: Nonaka(1994)

P3: organizational culture has a significant positive effect on knowledge management capability

2.4.3. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Information that is actively processed in the mind of an individual through a process of reflection and learning can be more useful than massive information (Alavi and Leidner, 1999). Organizational learning is the capacity within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience (Nevis et al. 1995) and it is an important ingredient in maintaining firm competency. Strong organizational boundaries that separate complimentary knowledge and prevent communication have the effect of fracturing core competencies since they disincentivize collaboration (Leonard-Barton, 1992). Quick imitation of knowledge resources is difficult since they require replication of time-consuming investments in learning (Mata et al., 1995). Superior capabilities can be developed through learning mechanisms, including repetition, experimentation, and even the analysis of small mistakes (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). When a competence no longer meets customers' needs or cannot be extended further is - an exhausted competence - and becomes a "core rigidity" (Leonard-Barton, 1992). Dynamic learning may fundamentally be the most critical factor to knowledge strategy since it lets unlearning of the obsolete (Pralhad, 1998). The ability of an organization to learn, accumulate knowledge from its experiences, and reapply that knowledge is itself a competency providing strategic advantage (Zack,1999; Chai et. al. 2003). This explains the need for dynamic learning, within a company for superior performance.

P4: Dynamic learning positively impacts knowledge management capability

P5: Organization culture has significant impact on dynamic learning

2.4.4. FLEXIBLE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) INFRASTRUCTURE

KM activities are supported by information infrastructures (Holsapple and Joshi, 2001, Sher and Lee, 2004; Tanriverdi, 2001; Zack, 1999). Information infrastructure facility often resulted in greater information infrastructure capabilities (Sher and Lee, 1994). Sher and Lee (2004) further suggested that more attention should be paid to the storage and retrieval of knowledge. This includes knowledge about products, production processes, customers, marketing strategies, financial results, strategic plans, goals etc. Thus storage of organizational knowledge constitutes an important aspect of organizational competitive advantage. It is found that an organization which was high quality in both KM and IT (a high-high fit) achieved high KM performance and satisfaction more frequently than those whose quality fitted low on either dimension or both. IT infrastructure of a firm may vary with firm resources, industry characteristics, information intensity etc. If information intensity is very high, then IT infrastructure is a strategic necessity. While innovating, IT infrastructure reduces cost and time of developing new systems. Though IT contradicts the requirements of Resource Based View (RBV) for being a competitive resource due to its imitability (Carr, 2003); continuous improvements in IT infrastructure or adding other resources to IT - adds to firm's competitive advantage. IT infrastructure flexibility is very critical since users are expected from time to time to do things that are not designed to be done by existing systems. IT infrastructure flexibility follows alignment of Information Systems (IS) objectives with that of business objectives. (Nancy Bogucki Duncan, 1995).

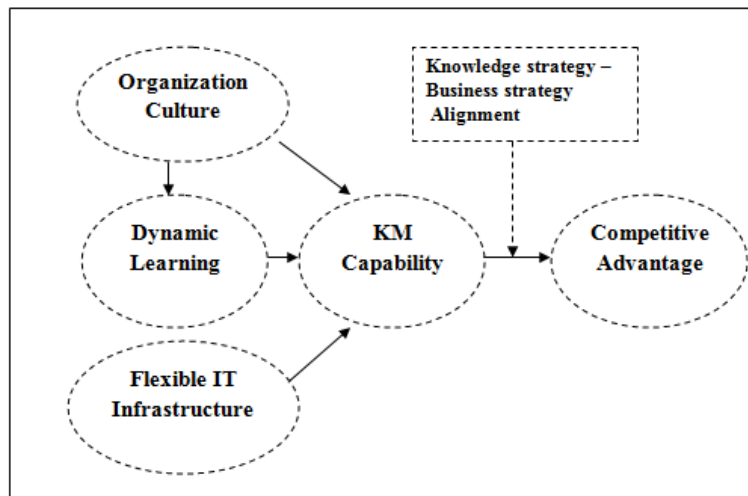
P6: Flexible IT infrastructure has a significant positive direct effect on knowledge management

3. DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

High velocity environments are characterized by limited barriers to entry and hyper competition, which may restore the social welfare benefits of perfectly competitive markets (Barney, 1991). To stay competitive, business has to assess and predict the opportunities and threats in the environment and accordingly renew its business strategy. The role of knowledge resource in this context is, availability in plenty with adequacy. There has to be sufficient knowledge base available for strategic renewal needs, which means that there is a need for knowledge strategy that exploits organizational resources and capabilities so as to ensure creation and utilization of tacit and explicit knowledge. That implies there have to be a favourable organization culture to allow knowledge conversions as noted by Nonaka et al (1995), a culture that facilitates dynamic learning according to the organizational knowledge needs. Information technology infrastructure that can invite external information, store it, process it, disseminate it- has to be flexible enough to adjust the data resources, storage needs and process requirements; which then contributes to dynamic knowledge management capabilities. This capability to create & utilize knowledge is the most important source of a firm's sustainable competitive advantage (Nonaka I and Toyama R, 2003). The conceptual model depicted in Fig. 4 demonstrates these dimensions of knowledge strategy. Only when knowledge strategy is aligned with business strategy, competitive advantage is created.

Dynamic capabilities are the core of the mechanism that allows firms to obtain economic returns from their ownership of knowledge assets (Teece, 2000) by way of facilitating better decision making, reducing costs and increasing profits. Knowledge management capability as a core competence is difficult for competitors to imitate due to complex harmonization of individual skills (tacit knowledge), technologies (IT infrastructure) and production skills (dynamic learning culture) (Prahalad and Hamel, 1999). Effective knowledge management typically requires an appropriate combination of all the above factors as indicated in the framework.

FIGURE 4: CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE STRATEGY



Source: Authors, Developed for this study

4. CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Most of the research in knowledge area is more on knowledge management which focuses on project specific or process specific domains or on organizational knowledge requirements in general. There is limited literature on knowledge strategy for high velocity environments. At the outset, present study contributes to literature in two ways. First it tries to distinguish knowledge strategy from knowledge management strategy and highlights the knowledge needs for strategic intent. Thus sets the context for strategic alignment. Secondly it explores the resources and capabilities that can be part of knowledge strategy for getting aligned with business strategy. The importance of this research is reflected in the fact that the alignment of knowledge-business strategies has an impact on maintaining and improving its competitive position.

Knowledge strategy requires first understanding the business needs. Since technology investments are expensive and cultural change management is time consuming, trial and error may prove costly for the organization. There have been frameworks for selecting knowledge strategy that is appropriate to the organization culture and KM project context (Kamara et al., 2002). Further research can provide insights into knowledge strategy choices and selection for high velocity environments.

5. CONCLUSION

The dynamic capabilities approach of strategic management seeks to explain why some organizations are more successful than others in building competitive advantage within dynamic markets. Knowledge strategy has to encompass knowledge management strategy that meets the knowledge requirements for strategic intent. Flexible IT infrastructure, dynamic learning, knowledge culture are found to be the factors for KM capability that meets the alignment requirements of knowledge and business strategy. Though knowledge is a resource, the way in which knowledge is managed and used will affect the quality of services of the firm. Hence firms' competitive advantages are not so much linked to their overall knowledge pool but are rather derived from the ability to create and renew it. Effective knowledge management, a dynamic capability in its own right, is also critical to the sustainable competitive advantage of the firm because it underpins the effective use of resources, development of other capabilities and innovations resulting in improved performance.

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