

45-842

Organizational Learning and Strategic Management

45-842, Section A
Mini 4, Spring 2026
TEP 2118, MW 4:00-5:45

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"The rate at which individuals and organizations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage."

-Ray Stata, Sloan Management Review

"If Hewlett-Packard knew what Hewlett-Packard knows, we would be three times as profitable."

**-Former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, Lew Platt
Quoted in Davenport & Prusak,**

COURSE OVERVIEW AND GOALS

Organizations vary enormously in the rates at which they learn—either from their own experience or the experience of others. Some organizations show remarkable performance improvements while others show little or no learning and improvement. Understanding the sources of this variation (aka firm heterogeneity) is a central topic in strategic management. We will identify factors explaining the variation in firm performance and discuss which factors are sources of competitive advantage.

Why does little or no learning occur in some organizations while others show impressive growth in productivity? In the course, we will examine why some organizations show rapid rates of learning and others fail to learn. Understanding sources of learning can enable managers to improve firm performance. Thus, the main goal of this course is to enhance your ability to increase the rate of learning and performance gains at your firm. For example, you will learn techniques for increasing creativity in organizations and for promoting knowledge transfer.

Learning involves innovating or creating new knowledge, retaining that knowledge, and transferring the knowledge throughout the firm. Increasingly, firms are organized in a distributed fashion to take advantage of differences in expertise, labor costs, and access to markets that exist around the world. Managing these distributed organizations effectively requires that knowledge be

retained and transferred from one organizational unit to another. Thus, we will examine how organizations create, retain, and transfer knowledge in this course.

In order to be effective, managers must excel at both quantitative analysis and qualitative judgment. In the course, we will discuss how to analyze data about learning curves, which can be estimated when organizations produce the same product or deliver the same service with some regularity. We will also develop qualitative judgment about how to learn from experience that occurs more rarely.

Specific questions addressed in the course include:

- 1) Why do some organizations learn and others fail to learn? What factors affect how the rate of performance improves with experience in firms? How can you increase the rate of learning at your firm?
- 2) What is a “growth mindset” and how can it benefit organizations?
- 3) How do individuals learn and how can training in organizations be designed to promote individual learning?
- 4) What is tacit knowledge and what are effective strategies for managing it in organizations?
- 5) How can organizations leverage transactive memory systems, or knowledge of who knows what, to improve firm performance?
- 6) Where is knowledge stored in organizations? How can firms be designed to capture the knowledge of individuals so that turnover does not hurt firm performance? Which knowledge repositories contain knowledge that is likely to be a source of competitive advantage in firms?
- 7) How can Human and Artificial Intelligence (AI) collaboration be designed to be effective?
- 8) How might you transfer knowledge from one unit of your firm to another so that performance gains made in one unit benefit the entire organization?
- 9) What are challenges in learning from failure? How can organizations be designed to learn from failure to avoid repeating mistakes from the past? What is the leader’s role in learning from failure?
- 10) What challenges to and opportunities for learning are posed by distributed work and AI? How can leaders manage distributed work and the use of AI effectively?

GRADES

Your final grade will be computed using the following weights:

Case Analyses	.10
Group Article/ Case Presentation	.10
Quizzes (2 @ .20 each)	.40
Participation	.15
Group Analysis and Final Presentation	.25

CASE ANALYSES

You are expected to analyze and individually prepare brief answers to the focus questions for three cases (NASA JPL, Rank Xerox and Children's Hospital Case). You are required to submit analyses of each case by noon on the day of the class discussion. Case write-ups will be graded pass/fail. No late assignments can be accepted. The case write-up should be done individually. You are not permitted to access information from other human or technological sources (e.g., Chat GPT). That is, the use of AI tools is not authorized for this assignment.

GROUP ARTICLE/CASE PRESENTATION

You are expected to lead (along with a group of other students) the presentation of one article (see articles with asterisks on syllabus). For the article presentation, you will have 20 minutes to present the article and lead its discussion. It is usually helpful to use several slides to present your analysis to the class. Specific questions to address in your analysis are included at the end of the syllabus. You should feel free to include additional material that you think would add value to the discussion. Remember to be constructive!

QUIZZES

There will be two open-book and open-note quizzes. You can access your own notes and course material but you are not permitted to access information from other human or technological sources (e.g., Chat GPT). That is, the use of AI tools is not authorized for this assignment. The questions will be essay questions -- either short-answer essays or analyses of (very brief) cases. The purpose of the quizzes is to check your knowledge of fundamental concepts and to give you an opportunity to apply your knowledge to analyze real business situations.

PARTICIPATION

Although it takes some quantity of participation to gauge its quality, participation is assessed primarily in terms of the quality of your contributions. Quality comments add value to the discussion by offering a new perspective, by providing relevant evidence, by building on previous comments or by moving the analysis in a new direction. Individuals who monopolize the conversation are rarely seen by their peers or by me as adding value to class discussion. Focus questions for each reading to help you prepare for its discussion are included in this syllabus.

FINAL PROJECT: GROUP QUALITATIVE OR QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

You will work with a group of your choosing to do either a qualitative or quantitative analysis of learning at an organization. While I do not have exact page requirements, I expect that you should be able to accomplish both analyses in approximately six- eight pages. Each group will have an opportunity to present their analysis to the class during the last week of class on April 21 or April 23.

Qualitative Analysis

You are required to work with your team to analyze an organization in terms of organizational learning processes and outcomes. You could choose an organization with which one of your team members is familiar or one that has been written about in the business and popular press (e.g., NASA).

- 1) Analyze the organization in terms of its ability to learn and to retain and transfer knowledge. You could analyze the organization's overall performance or you could focus on a particular aspect of organizational learning. For example, you might choose to analyze a merger in terms of barriers and facilitators to knowledge transfer.
- 2) Identify strengths and weaknesses of the organization in managing knowledge.
- 3) Recommend how the firm's management of organizational learning could be improved. Be sure to discuss how your recommendations remedy the problems you identified and the measures you would use to assess the effects of your recommended changes.

You may use AI tools on the qualitative assignment. You are responsible for the content of what you submit. It is your responsibility to determine the accuracy and validity of any information that you obtain through the use of AI. If you use AI, you must acknowledge how you used it and cite it.

Quantitative Analysis

Your team is hired by the top management team of an electric car manufacturer. Your task is to analyze learning and knowledge transfer at the firm and prepare a report of your analysis for its top management team. The firm, which manufactures both a high-end and a mass-market product, is considering divesting its mass-market product. The firm sees its core competency as focused on developing new technology and questions whether producing a high-volume mass-market product is consistent with its core competency. The firm asks for your advice about whether producing the mass-market product benefits their production of the more technologically sophisticated high-end product. That is, the firm wants to know if knowledge transfers from the low-end to the high-end product. You will be given a data set for your analysis. Your report should answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the firm's progress ratio?
- 2) Does knowledge transfer occur across the two models at your firm?
- 3) Do economies of scale occur in production at your firm?

You will be given a data set for your analysis. Your report should use concepts from the course in a conversational (i.e., jargon-free) way. Be sure to explain the basis for your conclusions. Please include a table with your results in an appendix.

You are not permitted to access information from other human (with the exception of the instructor and teaching assistant) or technological sources (e.g., Chat GPT). That is, the use of AI tools is not authorized for the quantitative assignment.

Organizational Learning and Strategic Management: Section A

<u>SCHEDULE</u>		
<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Requirements</u>

WEEK ONE

March 11	Introduction and Overview	Argote (Ch. 1)
	Growth Mindsets	Ibarra & Ruttan Bhattacharya Video of Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft Tugend

WEEK TWO

March 16	Tacit knowledge Assessing Learning	Nonaka
March 18	Individual Learning Transferring Knowledge across Individuals and Projects	Myers* Nasa JPL case (due at noon) Video of NASA Perseverance

WEEK THREE

March 23	Group Learning and Transactive Memory Group Exercise	Argote & Ren Paul Huckman & Staats*
March 25	Quiz	

WEEK FOUR

March 30	Organizational Memory & Intelligence	Argote (Ch. 4) Harford Wilson & Daugherty*
April 1	Transferring Knowledge	Argote (Ch. 6) Szulanski* Rank Xerox Case (due at noon) Liu

WEEK FIVE

April 6	Knowledge-sharing exercise	Hargadon & Sutton*
April 8	Learning from Failure	Garvin* Canon & Edmondson* Children's Hospital and Clinics case (Due at noon) Yoon et al.; Ember & Choksi

WEEK SIX

April 13	Quiz	
April 15	Simulation: Organizational Learning and the Development of Capabilities	Gozluklu & Sterman (Chapters 7 and 37) Read after class session

WEEK SEVEN

April 20	Learning and Leading in the Age of Hybrid Work and Artificial Intelligence Begin group presentations	Kolbjornsrud* Feurerriegel et al.* Elliott, Bloom & Choudhury*
April 22	Group Presentations	
April 24	Final Project Due (after end of course)	

*** Candidates for article presentations**

FOCUS QUESTIONS: LEARNING CURVES AND GROWTH MINDSETS**Argote (Chapter 1)**

1. The concepts of “learning curves” and “progress ratios” were developed to provide measures of organizational learning in situations where the same product is produced or the same service developed with some regularity. Explain these concepts and how they can be used to provide indicators of firm performance.
2. What factors explain the variation in progress ratios observed across firms?
3. How can you increase the rate of learning at your firm?
4. Why is organizational learning a source of competitive advantage in firms?

Ibarra & Ruttan

1. Compare and contrast a “fixed” mindset and a “growth” mindset.
2. What were the three manifestations of a growth mindset that Satya Nadella and colleagues identified for Microsoft?
3. What did Microsoft do to implement a growth mindset?
4. Does your organization have a growth mindset? If so, has it improved your organization’s performance? If not, do you think your organization could benefit from one

FOCUS QUESTIONS: TACIT KNOWLEDGE, TRAINING And TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE ACROSS INDIVIDUALS AND PROJECTS**Nonaka**

1. Discuss Nonaka’s four basic patterns for creating knowledge in organizations.
2. What can organizations do to facilitate the creation and transfer of knowledge?
3. What is tacit knowledge?
4. How can organizations be designed to promote the transfer of tacit knowledge?

Myers

1. Describe approaches organizations use for promoting vicarious learning (learning from the experience of others) in organizations.
2. Why does Myers recommend “coactive” approaches to vicarious learning, in which the person learning and the person sharing the knowledge work together?
3. What steps can a firm take to foster coactive vicarious learning?

NASA JPL (A) -- Write-up due at noon

1. Why is it challenging to transfer expertise from Senior personnel to their less experienced counterparts?
2. What is the best way to educate newcomers in complex organizations? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the “small project” approach, such as the ROV-E project?
3. When is knowledge replication likely to be successful? When is innovation likely to be successful?

For video of launch of Perseverance, the following segments are most related to our discussion: start-12:22, 25:00-34:00, 48:00-54:00

FOCUS QUESTIONS: GROUP LEARNING AND TRANSACTIVE MEMORY**Huckman & Staats**

1. Explain the concept of team familiarity and describe its relationship to team performance.
2. Why does team familiarity benefit team performance?
3. Are there conditions under which team familiarity does not benefit team performance?

Argote & Ren

1. Explain the concept of “transactive memory.” Describe a transactive memory system that evolved in a group of which you were a member.
2. How do transactive memories help group performance?
3. How can you promote the development of transactive memory systems in organizations?
4. How can transactive memory be a source of competitive advantage in organizations?

FOCUS QUESTIONS: ORGANIZATIONAL MEMORY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**Argote (Chapter 4)**

1. What are the key knowledge repositories in organizations?
2. Give an example of knowledge embedded in each of these repositories.
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each repository for retaining and transferring knowledge?
4. How can knowledge be retained in organizations in face of turnover of individual members?

Wilson & Daugherty

It has been argued that the greatest gains from Artificial Intelligence (AI) will come from AI augmenting humans rather than automating processes performed by humans.

1. In human-AI collaboration, what are the strengths of humans?
2. What tasks do humans need to do for effective human-AI collaboration?
3. In human-AI collaboration, what are the strengths of AI?
4. What tasks can AI do in human-AI collaboration?

FOCUS QUESTIONS: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Argote (Chapter 6)

1. Discuss how to assess if knowledge is transferring in your organization.
2. What are barriers to knowledge transfer in organizations?
3. How can you promote the effective transfer of knowledge in your organization?
4. Describe the roles of “multi-unit organizations” such as chains or franchises in transferring knowledge across organizational units.

Szulanski

1. Identify barriers to knowledge transfer in organizations. That is, which factors impede knowledge transfer?
2. Which factors facilitate knowledge transfer?
3. Szulanski downplays the role of motivation in knowledge transfer. Do you agree or disagree with his position? Why?

Rank Xerox Case -- Write-up due at noon

1. Compare and contrast the Wave I and Wave II attempts to transfer best practices throughout Rank Xerox.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of each wave. What are the facilitators and barriers to knowledge transfer in each wave?
3. What should Carlos do now?

FOCUS QUESTIONS: KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Hargadon & Sutton

1. Describe the “innovation factory.” How can innovation be institutionalized in organizations?
2. What is the role of previous experience in innovation?
3. What are the benefits of brainstorming? What are the conditions under which it is effective?

- 4 What is analogical reasoning and how can it facilitate innovation?
- 5 How can analogical reasoning be fostered in organizations?

FOCUS QUESTIONS: LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Garvin

1. How can a leader facilitate learning in his or her organization?
2. Explain what an “after-action” review is. How should after after-action reviews be managed to increase their effectiveness?

Cannon & Edmondson

1. What are the technical and social barriers that make it hard for organizations to learn from failure?
2. How can managers overcome these barriers?
3. What are the processes that organizations should put in place to learn from failure?

Children’s Hospital and Clinics -- Write-up due at noon

1. Describe the structures and processes put in place at Children’s Hospital to catch and prevent errors and to learn from them when they occur.
2. What barriers did Morath face as she tried to encourage people to discuss medical errors?
3. How can these barriers be overcome? What can leaders do to create a culture in which employees at all levels speak up when they make errors or become aware of problems?
4. What is your assessment of the Patient Safety Initiative at Children’s? What is your assessment of Morath’s leadership of the organizational change process at Children’s?

The articles by Yoon et al. and Ember & Choksi discuss problems at Boeing. We will discuss whether practices used at Children’s Hospital and Clinics can be applied to Boeing. No need to include this in your case analysis.

FOCUS QUESTIONS: Leading and Learning in the Age of Distributed Work and AI

Elliott, Bloom & Choudhury

1. What does research say about the benefits and costs of hybrid work vs.a five-day office model?
2. What should managers do to harness the benefits of hybrid work while avoiding its pitfalls?

Feuerruegel at al.

1. What are the critical factors that enable or impede the effective delegation of decisions made by managers to Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

Kolbjørnsrud

1. How can we use AI to make organizations more intelligent?
2. What fusion skills do managers need to combine the skills of humans and AI effectively?
How can we design effective human-AI collaboration?

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