

EFFECTS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS A BUSINESS RESOURCE FOR INNOVATIVE ENTERPRISES IN THE CITY OF VALENCIA: THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER COLLABORATION

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Abstract:

In nowadays crisis, local governments seek ways to promote and settle the basis for employment creation by private companies. This paper attempts to explore the role of customer knowledge management as an important business resource for innovation, the effects of such management and the role of customer collaboration as background to that resource. Literature shows that customer knowledge management has positive effects in the innovation process. Regarding customer collaboration as antecedent to knowledge management, the literature shows that this collaboration positively affects knowledge management between the company and the client during the innovation process. In order to test these hypothesis, and on the basis of a focus group, data from 200 companies in the Spanish city of Valencia and its metropolitan area were gathered using personal interviews, thus settling the bases for further quantitative research.

Keywords: *customer knowledge management; customer collaboration; customer role in the innovation process*

EFFECTOS DE LA GESTIÓN DEL CONOCIMIENTO COMO RECURSO DE NEGOCIOS PARA EMPRESAS INNOVADORAS EN LA CIUDAD DE VALENCIA: EL PAPEL DE LA COLABORACIÓN DEL CLIENTE

Resumen:

En la actual crisis, los gobiernos locales buscan formas de promover y asentar las bases para la creación de empleo por las empresas privadas. Este artículo trata de explorar el papel de la gestión del conocimiento del cliente en tanto que importante recurso empresarial para la innovación, los efectos de dicha gestión y el papel de la colaboración del cliente como telón de fondo para dicho recurso. La literatura muestra que la gestión del conocimiento del cliente tiene efectos positivos en el proceso de innovación. Con respecto a la colaboración del cliente como antecedente de la gestión del conocimiento, la literatura muestra que esta colaboración afecta positivamente la gestión del conocimiento entre la compañía y el cliente durante el proceso de innovación. Para probar estas hipótesis, y sobre la base de un grupo de estudio, se reunieron datos a través de entrevistas personales en la ciudad española de Valencia y en su área metropolitana, sentando así las bases para una posterior investigación cuantitativa.

Palabras clave: *gestión del conocimiento del cliente; colaboración del cliente; papel del cliente en el proceso innovador*

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1. Introduction

Due to the economic crisis, the market turmoil and the difficulties being experienced by the Spanish companies, in current times –and more than ever– they need to develop competitive advantages in order to maximize their chance to survive and succeed. In such environment, cooperation among local governments, universities and companies appears as an absolutely relevant issue. In this line, the *Valencian City Chair* was established at the University of Valencia as a result of the commitment between the academic institution and the Valencian City Council in order to jointly promote reflection in the area of thinking, designing and developing the city. As a result of this agreement, e.g., a research aiming the diagnosis of the resources and capabilities of Valencian companies regarding innovation issues will be developed in 2013, so settling the bases to establish an appropriate networking framework.

The city is an area that consists of built space and a set of actors who make investment decisions and location of production activities. Beyond the idea advocated by neoclassical economists and the new economic geography, the city territory is more than a point in space, as it is an organization in which actors interact and exchange goods, services and knowledge, following specific and established rules.

Thus it can be said that cities are continually transformed as a result of the learning processes, the acquisition of knowledge by its actors and the establishment of cooperative networks among them, as well as due to the strategies and actions that each one of these agents run to achieve the intended goals of companies and organizations (Vázquez 2000). The specific role of the local governments is generating investment, employment and sustainable development and innovation or, at least, promoting the appropriate conditions for it. So public actors should guide their actions in order to meet the needs and requirements of citizens and other stakeholders involved, to get them satisfied as well as to improve the welfare of the society in general (Rivera 2004). At the same time, they should head their activities mainly to attract new investors, residents and visitors (Hospers 2010).

On this basis, this paper is focused on companies as key players in the generation of investment, employment and innovation in the city as a result of a Public Administration concern. Namely, companies located at the city of Valencia and its metropolitan area were considered, in order to learn, from the point of view of innovation, which are the effects of knowledge management as a business resource facilitator of the required innovation and the role of customer collaboration as an antecedent to that resource.

So this research contributes to current literature in six ways:

- Firstly, it is centred on customer knowledge management, and this kind of researches are scarce (García-Murillo and Annabi 2002; Bueren et al. 2005; Blazevic and Lievens 2008), even when we can refer to a number of studies based on knowledge management in a general sense (e.g. Bhatt 2001; Choi and Lee 2003; Alegre and Lapiedra 2005; Lundwall and Nielsen 2007; Esper et al. 2010; Alegre et al. 2013; Tarí and García-Fernández 2013, among many others).
- Secondly, the effects of customer knowledge management are tackled on the customer results (an understudied approach), and not on firm performance or performance of innovation, as studies that tackle these effects are more numerous (Choi and Lee 2003; Darroch and McNaughton 2003; Kalling 2003; Chadam and Pastuszek 2005; Tanriverdi 2005; Lundwall and Nielsen 2007; Fugate et al. 2009; Huang and Shin 2009; Zack et al. 2009).
- Thirdly, a new perspective is provided on the collaboration between companies and their clients in the area of the innovation, a relatively new phenomenon in the marketing field (Blazevic and Lievens 2008).
- In fourth place, the study also considers direct effects of customer collaboration on customer results.
- Fifth, it contributes to determine knowledge management guidelines and to facilitate the collaboration with the customer effects on innovation in the organizations.
- The study also helps government, managers and researchers to clarify the relations between the concepts concerned (knowledge management, customer collaboration and results to the client) from a Marketing view.
- Finally, it contributes to the research on the fundamental premises in the Vargo and Lush's approach to Marketing from the service-dominant logic view (2004), namely the forth stating that "knowledge is the fundamental source of competitive advantage". And it also contributes to the research on the propositions suggested by Lush et al. (2007), specifically the second one, according to which "collaborative competence is a primary determinant of a firm's acquiring the knowledge for competitive advantage".

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Knowledge management

Knowledge management constitutes a research field continuously in progress, a greater number of articles being published day by day (Zack et al 2009), but also an emergent discipline with a few publications related to empirical research (Foss and Mahnke, 2003) in contrast to a number of contributions including conceptual frameworks and theoretical models. The empirical research basically comprises a few descriptive studies and/or exploratory/qualitative approaches to cases on knowledge management, including those by Nonaka (1994), Davenport and Prusak (1998), Massey et al. (2002), and Kalling (2003). Under this approach, the company is seen as an institution devoted to the creation and integration of knowledge (Grant 1996a) and, according to that premise, knowledge appears as a really important strategic resource. In this sense, Nonaka (1994) and Spender (1996) considered that the basic function of the company is the creation and application of knowledge.

Following the findings in the literature and checking the approaches to the concept of knowledge, it represents a valuable resource as the knowledge base of a company forms its core competences and thus creating value (Prahalad and Hamel 1990; Grant 1996a). According to this view, knowledge is the key factor or strategic resource in creating enterprise value, which leads to the need to identify which is the available knowledge, and to understand how to acquire, apply, store and classify it (Grant 1996b; Spender 1996; Tsoukas 1996), ever with a view to the creation or acquisition of new knowledge (Nonaka 1991, 1994; Hedlund and Nonaka 1993; Hedlund 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Nonaka and Teece 2001) that is applicable to the company. Also from the service dominant logic perspective, Lush et al. (2007) indicate that knowledge is the only true basis for sustainable development competitive advantage, because this is an operant resource that powers service.

Regarding *knowledge management*, this concept is related to the generation and application of knowledge as a resource (Spender 1996). Following Alavi and Leidner (2001), knowledge management is the application of knowledge through the implementation of organizational practices to store and disseminate it. Furthermore, the basic components of knowledge management are knowledge creation, preservation and transfer (Grant 1996a; Spender 1996; Spicer and Sadler-Smith 2006; Zhang et al. 2006). Moreover, according to Lei et al. (1996) knowledge management can be considered the most important one of the distinctive capabilities of the company and the foundation for the development of any other capacity in it. From this perspective, Alegre et al. (2013) point out that knowledge management inside an organization refers to its organizational practices and dynamic capabilities in relation to (respectively) the creation, preservation and transfer of knowledge. This new concept was suggested to facilitate the analysis of the management function, and we will use it to propose our model of relationships.

Specifically, and following Alegre et al. (2013), customer knowledge management will be considered as twofold, involving both *knowledge management practices* and *knowledge management dynamic capabilities*. Knowledge management practices are the result of knowledge application and consists of the knowledge management systems, local abilities and know-how that have been implemented in a firm-specific way so as to enable the performance of distinctive activities (Alavi and Leidner 2001). These practices have two dimensions: knowledge dissemination and knowledge storage. Concurrently, knowledge management dynamic capabilities are those that focus mainly on knowledge creation. To collect these capabilities, this study will work with two dimensions: external learning competence and internal learning competence.

2.2. Customer collaboration

The research on *customer collaboration* with companies as co-producer of services value is an area of relatively new research and a slightly studied phenomenon (Blazevic and Lievens 2008). Some previous studies deal with the participation of clients (i.e. with the concept customer participation) during the service encounter, from a perspective of service marketing (e.g. Lovelock and Young 1979; Bettencourt 1997; Meuter et al. 2000; or Bendapudi and Leone 2003).

Both Marketing theory and practice recognise the increasing importance of customer collaboration for service delivery and innovation (Vargo and Lush 2004; Blazevic and Lievens 2008). Through the collaboration of customers (customer collaboration), organizations learn, know the needs of the clients and improve their performance (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

The concept of customer collaboration is based in service innovation processes, where customers act more as knowledge providers than as direct executors of tasks (Ordanini and Parasuraman 2011). It refers to “information and feedback on specific issues” and “extensive consultation with users by means of interviews, focus group and team discussion” (Alam 2002, p. 255). This idea of collaborating with customers during the innovation process is similar to the suggestions from the Customer Active Paradigm (Von Hippel 1986) and the open-innovation literature (Chesbrough 2003). However, and according to Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011), those suggestions pertain to new (tangible) product development in engineering contexts, wherein external stakeholders participate directly in the design and manufacturing stages.

Following these authors’ postulates and the service dominant logic approach, the capability to collaborate with customers during service development transforms the customer into an operant resource on which the firm can draw to foster innovation and competitiveness (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Collaborating with customers during the service innovation process also taps into an often overlooked source of knowledge (Blazevic and Lievens 2008) and improves needs alignment through a better customization of the service, thereby increasing the likelihood of market success (Lusch et al. 2007). The customer collaboration facilitates a better alignment between innovations and customer needs as well (Alam 2002).

In contrast, in the service innovation processes, customers act more as providers of knowledge than as direct executors of tasks, and customer collaboration refers to “information and comments on specific issues” and “the extensive consultation with users through interviews, focus groups and debate teams” (Alam 2002, p. 255).

2.3. Customer results

The concept on *customer results* includes the seven items of satisfaction, loyalty, value added, communication, complaints or claims, customer retention and company image (Rafiq and Ahmed 2000; Lings 2004; Zahay and Griffin 2004; Gounaris 2005; Hooley et al. 2005; Vorhies and Morgan 2005; García et al. 2010).

3. Hypotheses

3.1. Relationship between knowledge management and customer collaboration

The relationship between knowledge management and customer collaboration constitutes a relatively new research field. Studies treating this relation are mainly theoretical (e.g. Lush et al. 2007; Blazevic and Lievens 2008), and only a few of them are empirical (e.g. Fang et al. 2008). Blazevic and Lievens (2008) stated explicitly how service dominant logic can help to knowledge management in organizations in collaboration with clients and how companies can place their clients as partners in exchange for the joint creation of knowledge. In this sense, Lush et al.’s (2007) second proposition stated that collaborative competence is a primary determinant of a firm’s acquiring the knowledge for competitive advantage. And the empirical model by Fang et al. (2008) shows that customer participation in the development of a new product positively affects to: i) information sharing; and ii) coordination effectiveness. This makes us propose customer collaboration as an antecedent to the creation of the knowledge and therefore to the management of the above mentioned knowledge, and thus to enunciate the following hypothesis:

H₁: customer collaboration in the innovation process will positively affect knowledge management between company and customer.

3.2. Effects of knowledge management in the customer results

Tarí and García-Fernández (2013) refer to some theoretical studies showing how knowledge management practices positively influence the operating results of the company (Davenport and Prusack 1998; Massey et al. 2002) as well as to other empirical researches pointing to this same evidence (Schulz and Jobe 2001; Choi and Lee 2003; Darroch and McNaughton 2003; Tanriverdi 2005; Lloch et al. 2007; Zack et al. 2009). Based on them, we can posit that customer knowledge management in the innovation process causes for itself positive effects on the client, such as improved loyalty and higher satisfaction. Thus, we can enunciate the following hypothesis:

H₂: customer knowledge management in the innovation process will have positive effects on the results for customer.

3.3. Effects of customer collaboration in the results

Customer involvement in the production process of a new service can be achieved in various ways (García et al. 2010). While some of these alternatives appear as more traditional and leading to minor modifications of existing services (Leonard and Rayport 1997), others are more innovative –as observation or ethnography– and capable of detecting latent needs (Carbonell et al. 2009). Through this involvement we can obtain a final product fully adapted to the needs of customers and perceived as superior when compared to competing offers. There are also other potential benefits (Pelham and Wilson 1996; Carbonell et al. 2009; Santos et al. 2013) as: i) design of a higher quality product; ii) time setting; iii) company perception as superior to competitors and improvement of company image; and iv) finding new processes for service provision (“creative tension” between the company and its customers).

Furthermore, authors as Matthing et al. (2004), Alam (2006) or Carbonell et al. (2009) conclude that the company-consumer interaction is favourable, among others, due to the following reasons: i) it provides a more complete idea of what consumers want, desire or need; ii) it reduces the development time of a new service; and iii) there is an improvement in the economic and financial performance of the new service. García et al. (2010) empirically contrasted the benefits of customer participation in terms of loyalty, satisfaction, company image and perception of value added, all variables representing customer results.

Such evidence allows us suggest that the customer collaboration with the company in the innovation process causes positive effects such as improving loyalty and customer satisfaction, company image and perception of value added, and thus we can enunciate the following hypothesis:

H₃: the customer collaboration in the innovation process will have positive effects on the results regarding the customers.

The previous hypothesis let us propose a theoretical model to be tested as shown in Figure 1.

4. Methodology

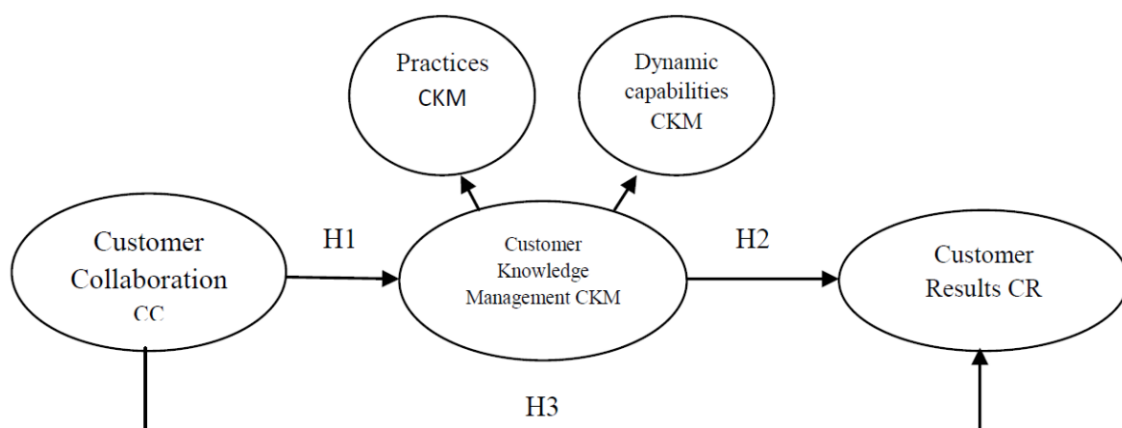
4.1. Collection of information

As a first step for qualitative research, a focus group was organized with representatives of the main company organizations in Valencia, namely eight organizations, The intended purpose was to better approach the concepts under research, mainly innovation, as well as factors promoting and braking it.

When in the focus group, participants began to talk about what meant for them an innovative company and what brought innovation to their business/industry. Then the conversation continued analysing the internal factors that could favour and restrict innovation and also discussing on those environmental factors that promote or constrain innovation. Finally, participants were asked about the actions by Public Administration (explicitly local) that they thought could boost innovation in enterprises.

The findings obtained from this exploratory research are presented in Table 1.

Figure 1. Causal relationship model



Source: own elaboration

Table 1. Focus group results (views of participants)

<i>Definition of an innovative company</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That organization that implements significant changes either in products, processes, marketing activities or business systems in order to improve its results • The one that creates value where none existed • The one that applies new knowledge and technology
<i>Specific actions of the public bodies to promote innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bringing innovation to school • Giving tax incentives to both SMEs and private investors • Channelling that the grants/aid gets more individualized to SMEs • Programs of analysis of the situation of an SME to improve. Aids to manage innovation. To improve communication
<i>Own organizational factors that restrict innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management teams which are not involved in the commitment to innovation • High costs in technology implementation • Insufficient human resources and lack of training • Lack of support from Public Administrations • Lack of knowledge of the innovation system we have in Valencia (IVACE, Technology Institutes, BICs...) • The return on investment is not immediate and the results do not come quickly • Fear of change
<i>Own organizational factors that drive innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixing innovation in the strategy of the company • Flexible attitudes, including ability to adapt to new situations • Acceptance of new ways of doing things, applauding the generation of new ideas • Rating creativity • Promoting opportunities for participation between managers and workers to discuss issues and seek common solutions • Willingness to take risks and change ideas • Allocation of resources to R&D activities • Education and training programmes for employees • Implementation of new technologies in production processes
<i>Environmental factors that limit innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of funding • Thinking that innovation is just technology • Ignorance of what to do and where to go • Disconnection between companies and universities • Short social recognition to employers
<i>Environmental factors that favour innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to cooperation and/or partnerships among companies • Promotion of entrepreneurial culture throughout society in a general sense • Competitiveness • Productivity improvement • Pursuit of excellence • Need for new products to meet new market niches needs • Appearance of new consumer groups • Development of new technologies

On the basis of the qualitative information and the literature review, quantitative data gathering should be done through e.g. personal interviews by using a questionnaire including all constructs under research. Taking under consideration the universe of companies located in Valencia city and its metropolitan area (a total figure of 47,614 in 2013), a random stratified probability sampling with proportional allocation to the economic sectors –agriculture, industry, construction and services– would be adequate.

On this basis, a total sample of 200 interviews could be considered as appropriate, then providing an error size of $\pm 5\%$ for a confidence level of 95.45%.

4.2. Measurement instruments

To measure *customer collaboration* we rely on the research by Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011), then including four items to measure the construct, as shown in Table 2.

At the same time *customer knowledge management* is conceptualized as a construct with two dimensions: *knowledge management practices* and *knowledge management dynamic capabilities*. They are measured by adopting the scale by Alegre et al. (2013). The measures for each dimension are provided in Table 2.

Regarding *customer results*, the scales by Vorhies and Morgan (2005) and García et al. (2010) are used, including seven items to measure the construct (see Table 2).

Table 2. Measures of the constructs

Variables	Source
<i>Customer Collaboration CC</i>	Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We interact with customers beyond the standards of market research 2. The perceived intensity of customer interaction is high 3. The frequency of meetings with customers is high 4. The number of customers with whom we interact is high 	
<i>Customer Knowledge Management CKM</i>	Alegre et al. (2013)
<i>CKM Practices</i>	<i>CKM Dynamic Capabilities</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Systems of explicit knowledge codification 2. Mechanism to foster information sharing by employees 3. Employees' participation techniques such as multidisciplinary teams, quality circles, improvement groups, etc. 4. Information distribution systems for employees, customers and suppliers 5. Global gathering and information processing systems 6. Control and revision systems for innovation projects 7. Feedback systems allowing knowledge created in finished innovation projects to be used in new projects 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to obtain information about state-of-the-art scientific and technological developments through technological surveillance systems 2. Effective and updated competitive intelligence 3. Ability to create knowledge through cooperative with industry associations 4. Ability to create knowledge through cooperation with R&D institutions such as universities and technological institutes 5. Technology acquisition (patents, equipment..) 6. Degree of academic qualification of employees in the R&D function 7. Ability to be positioned on the technological front line/frontier 8. Ability to manage the innovation effort 9. Ability to assess innovation projects 10. Suitability of human resources devoted to the R&D function 11. Ability to coordinate and integrate the different innovation project phases and the consequent interfunctional interphases between engineering, production and marketing
<i>Customer Results CR</i>	Vorhies and Morgan (2005); García et al. (2010)
<i>CKM Practices</i>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High degree of customer satisfaction 2. High degree of customer loyalty, and repeat customers are regular worshippers 3. Higher added value provided to our customers 4. High level of communication with our customers 5. Reducing the number of complaints and customer complaints 6. Improved company image to our customers 7. Increased customer retention best market 	

5. Conclusions

This paper presents the preliminary results from an ongoing research facing critical aspects for company survival in nowadays turbulent environments. In such context, local governments' activities to promote innovation in their administrative territories results in a key role as well as a core part of their commitment with the cities they are responsible for.

In this sense, the focus group that was organized let us approach innovation as a value creation process. As pointed out by the representatives of companies, local governments should design and implement more customized programs focused on promoting innovative activities in companies and training citizens in this field in a long-life learning process. Specifically, communication appears as an area to be hardly developed.

The participants in the focus group also provided some very significant issues to make a reflexion on. So, it seems that companies know the important role of both employees and consumers in the innovation processes. For them, innovation is something further than technology, and some of the participants in the focus group pointed out the importance of value creation in innovation.

On the basis of the literature review, some key constructs are approached, as well as their relationships. This gives rise to a theoretical model to be tested in a near future. In this sense, we expect to get promising relationships among the variables analysed as well as useful guidelines for the Valencian Local Council actions.

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