



The Effect of Organisational Learning on Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) Performance in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract: Organisational learning is vital for firms to gain competitive edge. Still, there is no indication that it is utilised by SMEs in Nigeria to improve efficiency. Hence, the study examined the effect of organisational learning on SMEs' performance to shed more light on this development. The study's population comprised all SME owners operating in Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South local government area. The Cochran's (1977) sample size formula was used to determine the sample size of 384 SMEs selected using purposive sampling technique across the two local government areas. Data were collected with the use of validated copies of structured questionnaires. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling was used to analyse the data collected. The study's findings revealed that information acquisition, information interpretation, and organisational memory significantly and positively affected SMEs' performance. The study concluded that organisational learning had a significant positive effect on SMEs' performance. It was recommended that SME owners acquire information internally and externally through training, seminars, and learning from other SMEs; disseminate the acquired information in simple and easy ways among employees; and ensure that crucial information and decisions made are stored so that concerned individuals could have access to them to enhance organisational performance.

Keywords: Organisational Learning; SMEs; Performance; Ogun State

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1. Introduction

Businesses worldwide are forced to find new ways to improve their performance through technological advances, financial globalisation, ever-increasing competition, and innovation. SMEs in Nigeria are not excluded because they must

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develop creative ideas, innovative products, remain open to technological developments, keep up with advances in technology and place equal importance on training in innovations to improve their performance (Wujiabudula & Zehir, 2016). As a result, firms rely on step-by-step approaches to acquire systematic learning capability (Basten & Haamann, 2018). First of all, the idea of organisational learning surfaced during the 1970s and was defined to capture mistakes and take steps in fixing organisational mistakes (Serinkan et al., 2014). According to Kanten, Kanten, and Gurlek (2015), organisational learning focuses on learning as an essential element in implementing the company's vision and the culture of encouraging a right learning setting that includes individual and group learning. It is often regarded as essential for obtaining more fantastic organisational overall performance and sustainable competitive advantage for SMEs (Dada & Fogg, 2014).

Organisational learning means creating, keeping, conveying, and delivering current or fresh knowledge in the organisation, which strongly impacts organisational performance (Ur Rehman, Bhatti & Chaudhry, 2019). Organisational learning performs an essential function in any organisation's success or existence within an extremely competitive market because it significantly affects organisational performance or competitive advantage (Ur Rehman et al., 2019). Organisational learning creates a mechanism for matching resources and skills gained by minimising time and costs in determining market demands, meeting customer demands, and addressing environmental changes. In this manner, organisations record improvement in business procedures, connection with the environment, and internal and external obligations to boost firm overall performance. Organisational learning also stimulates managers to pay attention to certain obligations required to improve learning, including training, seminars, weekly meetings, teamwork, and collaborative tasks to articulate its mission, vision, and objectives (Akgün et al., 2014). According to Megheirkouni (2017), organisational learning is quite suitable for organisations growing in an unstable business environment to improve their overall performance.

Chukwuma, Godwin, and Ndidi (2017) believe that organisational learning is a practice that involves the interaction of people with similar experiences in managing operations aimed at directing work-related attitudes towards achieving the organisation's goals. For organisational learning to produce the desired result, organisations must provide a structural framework that allows for constant learning among workers. However, the knowledge acquired, shared, and used enables organisations to be innovative and help improve their products' quality to meet the environment's needs. Therefore, the lack of a company's innovation causes rigidity, delay, and boredom due to the lack of organisational learning.

Organisational learning performs an essential function in determining Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) overall performance (Ur Rehman et al., 2019).

Organisational learning is an essential element within organisations describing their overall performance (Kim, Watkins, & Lu, 2017). Numerous studies show that researchers pay much attention to organisational learning in identifying their overall performance (Nafei, 2015; Walker, Chen, & Aravind, 2015; Andreou, Louca, & Petrou, 2016; Shurafa & Mohamed, 2016).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Evidence from the literature shows that organisational learning can unravel problems from challenges encountered in business environments. Still, this approach does not favour many Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. There is no tangible evidence that organisational learning has been used to improve SMEs' performance in Nigeria. Nevertheless, non-systematic and inconsistent learning methods remain prevalent among SMEs, where facilities and human resource-related solutions happen to be low (Tam & Gray, 2016). Chukwuma et al. (2017) noted that SMEs rarely conduct seminars, workshops, and symposia to acquire the necessary knowledge, use, and exchange among workers the desired skills. Corroborating the report of Chukwuma et al. (2017), the report of the Small and Medium Scale Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) (2017), that around 80% of SMEs die within the first five years from the start. Some of the factors responsible for its premature extinction are fiscal nature problems, ranging from higher taxes to heavy taxation, inadequate skills and training, poor education, unstable business environment, and other issues.

A careful inspection of existing literature revealed that the bulk of the empirical studies on organisational learning and firm performance have centred on large-scale organisations in developed countries (Fang et al., 2014). The SME sector continues to be paid less attention by researchers when it comes to organisational learning (Dada & Fogg, 2014). Hence, the current study fills the literature gap by testing the following research hypotheses.

1.2. Research Hypotheses

H₀₁: Information acquisition does not have a significant effect on SMEs' performance.

H₀₂: Information interpretation does not have a significant effect on SMEs' performance.

H₀₃: Organisational memory does not have a significant effect on SMEs' performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meaning of Organisational Learning

Organisational learning is a process by which organisational members acquire skills and co-opt knowledge necessary to develop capabilities, resources, and superior performance abilities. The definition suggests that organisational learning is driven by knowledge management practices shared by members of the organisations. The knowledge acquired, especially during seminars or symposia, is not resourceful until utilised (Franklin, 2015). In the same vein, Mylse (2014) sees organisational learning as a continuous process through which organisations respond to their environment by utilising various skills, knowledge, and capacities to achieve competitive advantage.

Organisational learning leads to technological innovation, process improvement, and product development (Gomes & Wojahn, 2017). The fact is, organisational learning will undoubtedly result in a higher level of competitiveness, and it is regarded as necessary for long-term organisational achievement and development. It has been proven that there is a positive relationship between the level of organisational turbulence and organisational learning. It means that the higher the changes in any business organisation's external environment, the higher the importance of organisational learning. In the absence of organisational learning, there will be stagnation, and the organisation will never adapt to environmental changes (Gomes & Wojahn, 2017).

2.1.1. The Components of Organisational Learning

2.1.1.1. Information Acquisition

Information acquisition is crucial for organisational learning practice to occur (Salim & Sulaiman, 2013). Information needs to be obtained before it may be beneficial to the organisation. There are numerous approaches that an organisation can use to get information internally and externally (Salim & Sulaiman, 2013). When staff goes for training, the hope is usually that the particular staff returns to his workplace more loaded with brand new information that aids in resolving difficulties being confronted in the organisation. Learning through practical experience and watching others are generally two required methods by which a company can have information (Salim & Sulaiman, 2013). Salim and Sulaiman (2013) discovered a strong and statistically significant connection between information acquisition and overall performance.

2.1.1.2. Information Interpretation

Organisational learning can simply occur when there is meaning in the information being obtained by a person or an organisation (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). As outlined by Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011), more learning in an organisation

occurs when more people understand the real meaning of the various ideas by different people within the organisation. Suppose the information is not really crystal clear and complicated to the recipient. In that case, learning cannot occur successfully, and the individuals will not be working in the direction of one common goal. Therefore, decision-makers in an organisation must ensure that information being disseminated is straightforward and simple to comprehend.

2.1.1.3. Organisational Memory

Walsh and Ungson (1991) described organisational memory as “stored information from an organisation’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions.” They viewed organisational memory as a storage facility or perhaps a bin, including people, tradition, transformations, organisational structures, ecology, and external records. They also explained essential procedures linked to organisational memory performance (acquisition, retention, and retrieval) and the kinds of knowledge (what, why, who, etc.) that every retention bin could contain. According to this specific theoretical foundation, they formulated organisational memory propositions to numerous organisational procedures, such as decision-making and change management. They also offered a research plan to deal with the particular structure, process, and consequences of organisational memory, pointing out that future investigation on organisational memory could inform our knowledge of organisational phenomena, such as change, design, and structure.

2.1.2. Concept of Performance

Mills and Smith (2011) define organisational performance as an organisation’s ability to achieve its goals by using available resources efficiently and effectively. According to Espinosa and Porter (2011), an organisation’s definitive objective is to maximise profit. In contemporary business, this has seized to be correct, given the different changes taking place in the market. The responsibility of organisations has increasingly expanded to cover more stakeholders than business owners alone (Nickels, McHugh & McHugh, 2011).

An organisation’s performance is now viewed in terms of the business’s ability to meet various stakeholders’ needs. Profit maximisation is no longer the only measure that is used to assess the performance of an organisation. Businesses are now required to meet the non-financial objectives of the organisation, just like their financial objectives. For example, the contemporary business environment has seen an expansion in companies’ need to meet society, government, interest groups, and other stakeholders’ needs.

As a result of the deficiencies inherent in the financial-based performance, the non-financial performance was adopted in this study (Gomes, Yasin, & Lisboa., 2004; Preda and Watts, 2004). Gomes et al. (2004) argued that the financial performance approach does not meet organizations’ current needs in today’s rapidly changing

environment, leading to short-term thinking. The non-financial performance takes an explicit strategic focus and, within a suitable period, provides more relevant internal information and can respond to different information needed for decision-making. It can also provide indicators for improving key organisational activities (Hoque and Adams, 2011) and becoming better indicators of future financial performance (Banker, Potter, & Srinivasan, 2000).

3. Methodology/Design

The survey research design method, which systematically gathers information from an individual sample, was adopted. The choice of survey technique was because it describes the choices, behaviours, or factual information of respondents. The study's population comprised all registered SMEs owners in Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South local government areas that employed between 1 to 199 persons and have a revenue of less than ₦10 million and less than ₦1 billion (excluding land and buildings). The choice of Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South local government area was because they were located in Ogun State's capital, where the Federal and State government agencies are situated. It has the highest infrastructural development as the State capital and provides residency to many politicians, wealthy individuals, civil servants, artisans, and traders. The SMEs owners were drawn from the five major economic sectors: the wholesale/retail trade, agriculture, other services [Transport and storage, Information and communication, and education], manufacturing, accommodation, and food services. These economic sectors were considered because they accounted for 91% of all SMEs and contributed to Nigeria's growth and development (National Survey of SMEs, 2017).

Since the sampling frame was unavailable, the purposive sampling method was used to select SMEs' owners. Neuman (2005) argues that the purposive sampling method allows researchers to select respondents with ample knowledge to achieve the research's goals and objectives. As the actual number of SMEs operating in Abeokuta North and Abeokuta South could not be ascertained, Cochran's (1977) sample size formula, when the population is unknown, was applied to determine the sample size as shown below.

$$n_0 = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where;

p is the maximum variability, which is equal to 0.5

q is the desired level of precision, which is equal to 0.5

z is the selected critical value of desired confidence level, which is equal to 1.96

e is the desired level of precision, which is equal to 0.05.

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = 384$$

A sample size of 384 was identified and reached by selecting 77 SME owners from the five economic sectors.

A structured survey instrument taken from past research was used for data collection. The survey scale developed by Pérez López, Montes Peón, and VazquesOrdás (2005) was used to measure organisational learning. The survey scale comprises three constructs, which are Information acquisition (IA), Information interpretation (II), and Organisational Memory (OM). IA has ten measurement items, II has four measurement items, while OM has five measurement items. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale with (1 = *strongly disagree*, to 5 = *strongly agree*). The non-financial performance measure developed by Henri (2006) was adopted in this research. The performance measures capture the non-financial measures (e. g., market share and sales growth). The scale has four measurement items measured on a five-point Likert scale with (1 = *much worse than competitors*, to 5 = *much better than competitors*). Descriptive statistics, which involved frequency counts and percentages, were used to describe the respondents' demographic profile. The PLS-SEM was estimated to examine the effect of organisational learning on SMEs' performance.

4. Analysis of Results

Three hundred and eighty-five copies of the questionnaires were administered to the respondents. Three hundred and fifty-three were returned, which represented an approximately 92% response rate. During the data cleaning process, 48 respondents were dropped as they were suspected of following a repetitive response pattern. For this study's purpose, a repetitive response pattern is when a respondent fills the same option for 15 consecutive survey items. After completing the data cleaning process, the study was left with 337 valid copies of the questionnaire for further analysis.

The respondents' demographic characteristics revealed that more than half (55.60%) of them were males. Concerning marital status, 59% of the respondents were married. The majority (93.10%) were adults between the ages of 31 and above 60. All the respondents were literate, with 64.10% being owners of secondary school

and various certificates. Less than half (29. 6%) of the SMEs have been operating their businesses within 6 to 10 years. Considering the years of experience of managing SMEs, approximately 39% ($n = 56$) had spent between six to 10 years in operation. Concerning the businesses' assets, the majority (67. 6%) of the respondents operated business with assets worth ₦5,000,000 to ₦49,000,000. The SMEs owners were mostly (35. 9%) wholesale and retail trade. Similarly, the majority (90. 8%) employed between 1 to 49 workers.

4.1. Measurement Model

The PLS-SEM was estimated to determine the standardised factor loading estimates of the indicator (observed) variables on the latent (unobserved) variables. The validity of the survey items was established through convergent and discriminant validity. To test convergent validity, we performed a bootstrap with 1,000 resamples and then examined the t -values of the outer model loadings (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017). Convergent validity is demonstrated when all survey items load significantly on their respective latent construct. As shown in Table 1, all the survey items showed standardised factor loading estimates that were significant at the 1% level denoting strong convergent validity.

An additional test of convergent validity is that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), a measure of variance explained by a latent construct for the variance observed in its measurement items, should be at least 0. 50 or higher. As shown in Table 2, the tests indicated a high degree of convergent validity as all the values were above the 0. 5 thresholds.

Two tests were performed to evaluate discriminant validity. First, the cross-loadings of measurement items on latent constructs were examined. In this test, discriminant validity is demonstrated when an item loads more highly on its intended construct than on any other construct. However, this difference in loadings should be at least 0. 10. As shown in Table 3, all items showed excellent discriminant validity.

The second test of discriminant validity is to compare the AVE score for each construct. In the AVE test of discriminant validity, the square root of a given construct's AVE should be larger than any correlation of the given construct with any other construct in the model. These test results were generally accepted, as shown in Table 4, which demonstrated strong discriminant validity.

Finally, the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability score were computed to test the reliability of measurement items. As shown in Table 5, all constructs exhibited a reliability score well over the 0. 70 thresholds in line with Bryman and Bell (2015).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Analysis of Construct Validity

Survey Items	Mean	SD	SFL
Information Acquisition (IA)			
The business encourages employees to be part of formal and informal networks from outside the business	3.12	1.33	0.71***
The business experiments new ideas and approaches to doing things	2.57	1.07	0.75***
As a result of the experience acquired, the employees are more efficient in exercising their responsibilities	3.48	2.02	0.77***
There is some time devoted to discussions about the business's future needs	3.44	1.92	0.81***
The employees are informed of how the business was created, its mission and philosophy of work	3.05	1.01	0.72***
There is a consolidated research and/or development policy at the level of the business	3.55	2.00	0.77***
Regular meetings are held between departments to integrate the existing information	3.79	1.84	0.75***
Vital information is transmitted quickly to all employees	3.46	1.12	0.81***
There are people responsible for collecting the proposals made by the business's employees, to reunite and distribute them internally	3.95	2.04	0.72***
The business systems and procedures support innovation	3.54	2.02	0.74***
Information Interpretation (II)			
The business obtains and interprets as uniform as possible information which has been very crucial	3.93	2.34	0.78***
All the employees share and are committed to the mission of the business	3.58	1.46	0.74***
The business collects information about possible changes in the environment	3.77	1.40	0.79***
The business learned from other businesses by responding to problems before they arise	3.69	1.04	0.80***
Organisational Memory (OM)			
The business has databases to store information, knowledge, experiences to be able to use them later	3.98	1.89	0.89***
Databases are constantly updated	3.75	2.07	0.82***
The employees have access to the business's databases, depending on the specific needs of their activity	3.63	0.56	0.73***
Once the employees know who they have to contact, when an opportunity or problem arises, it is possible to have access to that person in a convenient way	3.01	0.21	0.76***

The employees are aware of people with the specific abilities and experience to intervene when an opportunity or problem arises	3.52	1.22	0.85***
Organisational Performance (OP)			
We have been able to maintain customer loyalty over the years	3.11	1.66	0.71***
Our product quality has increased over the years	3.13	1.51	0.86***
Our customer base has increased over the years	3.85	1.03	0.81***
We have been able to develop new product and services over the years	3.38	1.01	0.76***

Source: Author's computation, 2020.

Notes: *** means significant at 1% critical level; SFL = Standardised Factor Loadings; SD = Standard Deviation

Table 2. AVE Score

Construct	AVE
IA	0.57
II	0.61
OM	0.66
OP	0.62

Source: Author's Computation, 2020.

Table 3. Cross Loadings of Measurement Items to Latent Constructs

Item	IA	II	OM	OP
IA1	0.71	0.21	0.18	0.32
IA2	0.75	0.13	0.15	0.43
IA3	0.77	0.17	0.25	0.48
IA4	0.81	0.16	0.21	0.53
IA5	0.72	0.19	0.16	0.45
IA6	0.77	0.41	0.18	0.49
IA7	0.75	0.38	0.06	0.33
IA8	0.81	0.55	0.22	0.40
IA9	0.72	0.47	0.20	0.37
IA10	0.74	0.45	0.19	0.44
II1	0.43	0.78	0.20	0.26
II2	0.33	0.74	0.44	0.46
II3	0.23	0.79	0.36	0.29
II4	0.22	0.80	0.23	0.38
OM1	0.20	0.28	0.89	0.41
OM2	0.19	0.21	0.82	0.36
OM3	0.18	0.17	0.73	0.33
OM4	0.16	0.13	0.76	0.47
OM5	0.27	0.23	0.85	0.39
OP1	-0.22	-0.34	0.50	0.71
OP2	-0.25	-0.30	0.44	0.86

OP3	-0.26	-0.25	0.47	0.81
OP4	-0.17	-0.28	0.53	0.76

Source: Author's computation, 2020.

Table 4. Correlation of the Latent Variable Scores with Square Root of AVE

Construct	IA	II	OM	OP
IA	0.87			
II	0.64	0.88		
OM	-0.28	-0.30	0.81	
OP	-0.23	-0.31	0.58	0.84

Table 5. Reliability Scores

Construct	Composite reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
IA	0.93	0.75
II	0.86	0.86
OM	0.91	0.79
OP	0.89	0.75

Source: Author's Computation, 2020

The result in Table 6 revealed that information acquisition had a significant and positive effect on organisational performance as demonstrated by the large and significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.640, p < 0.000$); therefore, hypothesis one was not supported. Information interpretation had a significant and positive effect on organisational performance, as demonstrated by the large and significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.562, p < 0.000$); therefore, hypothesis two was not supported. Organisational memory had a significant and positive effect on organisational performance as demonstrated by the significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.755, p < 0.000$); therefore, hypothesis three was not supported. The explained variance for the dependent variable organisational performance was about 51%. Overall, organisational learning had a significant and positive effect on organisational performance.

Table 6. Test of Hypotheses

Structural path	β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
IA→OP	0. 640	9. 275	0. 000
II→OP	0. 562	6. 109	0. 000
OM→OP	0. 755	8. 882	0. 000
Squared multiple correlations			
PS	0. 514		

Source: Author's Computation, 2020

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The research's purpose was to examine the effect of organisational learning on SMEs' performance in Abeokuta, Ogun State. Based on the analysis results, the study successfully provided evidence that organisational learning had a significant and positive effect on SMEs' performance. First, the findings showed information acquisition had a significant and positive effect on SMEs' performance with a beta coefficient of 0. 640 and a probability value of 0. 000. The finding was in line with the results of Alzuod, Isa, and Othman (2017), Fernandez-Mesa and Alegre (2015), Salim and Sulaiman (2013), and Sibiya, Sandada, and Mago (2016). They found out that organisations that gathered relevant information on changing business environments were highly adaptive, innovative, and perform better than their counterparts who do not gather relevant information. They also declared that a business organisation that gathered information through various means, such as internal and external training of employees, is better placed to adapt to change and achieve better results than those that do not gather information in today's information era. Those organisations that do not gather information are surprised when changes occur and are unlikely to survive in the ever-changing contemporary business world. Therefore, SMEs that wish to survive this business environment should consider developing the skill to obtain and assimilate the knowledge necessary for innovation, improvement, and transformation for better performance.

Secondly, information interpretation had a significant and positive effect on SMEs' performance. The result was confirmed by a beta coefficient of 0. 562, with a probability value of 0. 000. The finding implied that the SMEs made information accessible within their organisation necessary for transferring learning to others, which became part of the business collective and shared knowledge base. The result was consistent with the findings of Alzuod et al. (2017), Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011), and Fernandez-Mesa and Alegre (2015). They opined that information interpretation is critical in enhancing organisational performance.

Third, organisational memory had a significant and positive effect on SMEs' performance. The result was confirmed by a beta coefficient of 0.755, with a probability value of 0.000. The result implied that SMEs could learn from history, which in turn led to enhancing their performance. The finding was in line with that of Alzuod et al. (2017) and Fernandez-Mesa and Alegre (2015). Their studies found that firms that learn from history could record more success than those who refuse to learn from their past events.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main conclusion to be drawn from the study was that the higher the level of information acquisition, interpretation, and organisational memory in a business, the better the performance. So, SMEs that wish to improve on performance should endeavour to practice organisational learning to survive the ever-changing business environment.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made that SME owners should endeavour to acquire information both internally and externally in the form of training, seminars, and learning from other SMEs to solve current and future problems that may arise. Disseminate the acquired information in simple and easy ways among employees via letters, memos, and telephone conversations. Ensure that crucial information and decisions made are stored so that concerned individuals could have access to them at any time.

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