

PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES AMONG YEMENI UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS

Khaled Ateik Saeed Abdullah¹ and Norliya Ahmad Kassim²

¹Department of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Arts,
Sana'a University, Yemen

²Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA
Puncak Perdana Campus, No.1, Jalan Pulau Angsa AU10/A, Section U10
40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: kldateeq@hotmail.com; drnorliya@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of organizational level learning practices among university librarians in Yemen. The *Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire* (DLOQ) developed by Watkins and Marsick (1993) was used as the instrument for collecting data. Twenty-four variables were used to assess the perception of organizational level learning practices among senior and middle-level librarians of all Yemeni university libraries (seven public and 11 private). The response rate was 72% ($n = 198$). The results of the study show that the mean scores of learning practices at the organizational level were not enough to consider Yemeni university libraries as learning organizations. The result of comparison showed that the mean score rating for private university libraries is higher than the mean score for public university libraries. The study suggests the need for more studies of organizational learning in order to understand the barriers of practicing organizational learning. Furthermore, for effective organizational learning, the results propose institutionalizing individual and team learning as prerequisites.

Keywords: Learning organization; organizational learning; Academic libraries; University librarians; Yemen

INTRODUCTION

Different Yemeni institutions are currently concerned with substantial developments as a response to government plans which affirm that economic developments in Yemen cannot be achieved without increasing the skills and knowledge-base of the country's workforce. Like other institutions, Yemeni university libraries are concerned with change so as to be able to sustain and compete in current and fast changing environment. To do so, these libraries need to adopt effective strategies that help them

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move forward and develop proactive approaches and measures for change. Literature on organizational learning asserts that organizational learning is one of the most important features of successful organizations that distinguished knowledgeable staff.

Hence, in order to remain viable over time within this fast-changing environment, all organizations recognized the importance of embracing the concept of learning organization that is designed to facilitate learning to all their members. Senge (1990, 3) defines the learning organizations “as places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together”.

Baughman and Hubbard (2001) state that there is much for library staff to learn from the ideas of Senge and others related to learning organizations as they begin to incorporate the disciplines into their organization. In addition, Giesecke and McNeil (2004) suggest that to implement a learning organization in libraries, library staff need to build a foundation based on an awareness of learning and create an environment that encourages openness, and library’s leaders must be committed to the concepts of a learning organization, be willing to share power with employees, and be committed to promoting learning. Proponents suggest that adopting learning organization strategies should promote individual, team, and organizational learning and that such enhanced learning should yield performance gains (Garvin 1993; Marsick and Watkins 2003). Thus, in the age of modernization, as Yemeni university libraries are concerned with developments they are required to be knowledge driven. They are in dire need of organizational learning and establishing its concept to build the basic blocks of the journey to be learning organizations. Therefore, this study addresses the need for empirical information about organizational level learning practices among Yemeni university librarians.

LEARNING ORGANIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In spite of different studies and views written about the learning organization and organizational learning, there is agreement that both terms are correlated. Thomsen and Hoest (2001) see that the learning organization and organizational learning as two sides of the same coin considering that the organizational learning is the central activity in the learning organization. However, it is very important to understand the term learning organization to understand the meaning of organizational learning.

Garvin's (1993) definition of organizational learning relies on the requirements that an organization must satisfy in order to become a learning organization. He defines the learning organization as an organization that is skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. On the other hand, Ortenblad (2001) distinguishes between organizational learning and learning organization. Learning organization is a form of organization while organizational learning is activity or processes (of learning) in organizations, and that learning organization needs efforts while organizational learning exists naturally without any efforts. He explains that as a distinction between something that exists naturally without any efforts and something that needs activities or efforts to be naturally exist. Thus, he expresses that all organizations would have organizational learning, but only some would be learning organizations. In this regard, Dodgson (1993) makes use of the term "natural state" for organizational learning, while learning organization is seen to move beyond natural learning. Dodgson's point of view in this regard is that organizational learning is something that exists without efforts, while learning organization demands activity.

Many empirical works have been conducted on the topic in different areas. In the Arabic context, review of the literature shows some of organizational learning writings. In this regard, Higan (1998) underlines the critical absence of organizational learning concept in Arabic management literature. Higan reviews some contributions written by Western writers about organizational learning. To raise the performance of Arab universities, he suggests the model of Lorange's four stages for building a learning organization. Higan concludes that organizational learning is very important as a strategy for organizations to solve their problems especially these are seeking to apply total quality management.

In Saudi Arabia, Al-Amin's (2006) contribution focuses on offering an operational definition of organization learning through skimming a number of literatures on organizational learning. To evaluate the performance of Saudi public organization service centres, Al-Amin suggests a model that is based on "Queuing Theory" to identify the impact of organizational learning process on firm's performance improvement. Another contribution is from Al-Swidan's (2001) book entitled "*The learning organization: How human learn and how organizations learn?*" which provides a broader understanding on how both human and organization learn. Ayoub (2004) conducts a study to investigate top-level managers' perception of organizational

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learning practices in large Saudi firms, and the impact of organizational learning practices on firm performance improvement. Based on a self-administered questionnaire, the findings of the study show that top-level managers perceived a moderate degree of organizational learning practices, and the cultural dimension have the strongest relationship to the strategic change. In another study in Saudi Arabia, Abu-Kidir (2006) evaluates the readiness and potentials of the institute of public administration in terms organizational learning practices and applying the concept of the learning organization. The results of study show that the institute has the characteristics of learning organizations based on the five dimensions used to assess organizational learning practices.

In Jordan, Abu Khdra and Rawabdeh (2006) conduct a study to examine the impact of the application of management and human resource practices on organizational performance, and they outline the key elements and assess development of the learning organization concept in Jordan. A total of 41 companies belonging to large industrial sectors participate in this survey. Eight constructs are used to explore the presence of the learning organization in these companies. The results show that the learning organization concept can be explored in Jordanian industry companies. The study supports the relationship between learning organization practices and organizational performance.

In Malaysia, Norliya and Azizah (2005a) conduct a study to investigate whether librarians are practicing the concepts of learning organization, and to examine the perceptions of librarians on the practices of organizational level learning in public and private university libraries in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The results of the study revealed that librarians perceived learning practices at the organizational level do exist generally, but they are not overly convinced of the extent to which the practices exist. The findings also demonstrate that the librarians in the private university libraries are more likely to respond with certainty of the existence of learning at the organizational level than do the librarians from the public university libraries.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

- i) To identify librarians' perceptions on the practices of organizational level learning;

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- ii) To examine whether there is a significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between the public and private university librarians;
- iii) To examine whether there is a significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between senior and middle level librarians.

The following two hypotheses are put forward in this study:

- i) There is no significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between the public and private university librarians;
- ii) There is no significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between the senior and the middle-level librarians.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey method using the instrument: *“Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire”* (DLOQ) developed by Watkins and Marsick (1993). Twenty four variables were used to assess the perceptions on organizational level learning practices among senior and middle level-librarians of all Yemeni university libraries (seven public and 11 private). The response rate was 72% ($n = 198$). Respondents were asked to respond to each question using a seven interval-scale with 1 representing *almost never* and 7 representing *almost always*.

The instrument was translated into Arabic language by two academic staff at Department of Library and Information Science, Sana’a University. Both academicians independently shared very close translations for the majority of the items. Some items were re-worded to be understood in the Yemeni context. Thus, some revisions for more understandable meaning were made. Additionally, to make sure that the items in the Arabic questionnaire have similar meaning with those items in the original version, back translation was conducted through an academician from the Department of English Language in the Faculty of Arts, Sana’a University. Words or expressions were compared and revised until consensus was attained. It is worth noting that the questionnaire was developed to be more library-friendly language. The questionnaire was tested for its clarity and reliability through a pilot study by giving it to 30 librarians of the central library of Sana’a University. The result of reliability for pilot study showed that Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient exceeds 0.9, indicating that this instrument is a reliable measure. Reliability test has been done twice; the first was after conducting the pilot study, and the second, after the data were completely collected.

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All the returned questionnaires were analyzed. Using descriptive statistics, collected data were summarized, simplified, and organized. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used to analyze data. Descriptive analysis by using mean score was used for research question number one. For research questions two and three of comparison, the choice of the statistical tests used was dependent on the normality testing. The data collected was statistically analyzed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 13.0.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

A total of 198 librarians participated in this study. More than 51% (100) of the respondents were females and 49% (98) were males. Sixty three (32%) were from senior-level librarians, whereas the majority 68% (135) were from middle-level librarians. Bachelor holders represent the highest percentage (53% or 105), followed by those who hold qualifications lower than bachelor degree at 36% (71). Those who hold graduate degree (higher diploma, master and PhD degrees) comprised the lowest percentage by only 22 (11%). Forty-seven (24%) obtained library and information science qualifications while the majority of over three-quarters (76%, 151) of respondents possessed other qualifications. One-hundred and seventeen (59%) were official or permanent librarians, 24% (47) were monthly contract librarians while the lowest (17% or 34) were part-time librarians.

There are 18 universities (seven public and 11 private) in Yemen. The majority of respondents (82.3%, 163) were from public university libraries, while 17.7% (35) were from private university libraries. Libraries having less than 10 librarians were private university libraries. More than 50 (26.3%) were sampled from Sana'a University library while between 41-40 (14.1%) were sampled from Aden University library. Between 31 to 40 librarians, which were almost one-quarter (24.2%) were sampled from Al-Hodeidah and Taiz, whereas less than ten percent (8.6%) with 21 to 30 librarians were sampled from Hadramout. The least with 11 to 20 librarians (9.1%) were sampled each from Ibb and Dahamar. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of respondents.

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Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Number of Librarians	Number of Library	University	Respondents	
			N	%
10 or less	11	Al-Watania (The National)	35	17.7
		Modern Sciences		
		Future		
		Queen Arwa		
		Saba'a		
		Al-Andalus		
		Al-Yemenia		
		Applied and Social Science		
		Science and Technology		
		Al-Ahqaf		
11-20	2	Ibb	18	9.1
21-30	1	Dhamar	17	8.6
31-40	2	Hadramout	48	24.2
		Taiz		
41-50	1	Al-Hodeida	28	14.1
		Aden		
> 50	1	Sana'a	52	26.3
Total	18		198	100.0

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions on the Practices of Organizational Level Learning

Twenty four items reflect the opinions of respondents on the practices of organizational level learning in their library. The mean scores of all items are displayed in Table 2 arranged in ascending order. Respondents were asked to rate a scale from one to seven in which 1 represented *almost never* and 7 represented *almost always*. Therefore, a score of four (4) is interpreted as neutral. This study suggests that any statement score 4.0 or above indicates that the libraries can be seen as learning organizations with that particular statement. In addition, the same for overall mean score of 4.0 or above is an indication that the libraries can be seen as learning organizations.

The results as shown in Table 2 revealed that about 8.3% of all the 24 items have the lowest mean scores: *my library supports staff who take calculated risks* (mean=2.54)

Table 2: Mean scores and percentage of organizational level learning

	Statement	Mean	Positive Percentage
1	My library supports staff who take calculated risks	2.54	8.1
2	My library measures the results of the time and resources spent on training	2.89	17.2
3	In my library, leaders generally support requests for learning opportunities and training	3.08	19.2
4	My library uses two-way communication on a regular basis, such as suggestion systems, electronic bulletin boards, or town hall/open meetings	3.12	14.1
5	My library maintains an up-to-date database of employee skills	3.14	20.2
6	My library creates systems to measure gaps between current and expected performance	3.15	19.7
7	My library recognizes staff for taking initiative	3.19	22.2
8	In my library, leaders recognize the need for staff learning for all levels of employees	3.22	18.7
9	My library builds alignment of visions across different levels and work groups	3.26	20.7
10	In my library, leaders continually look for opportunities to learn	3.33	22.7
11	My library considers the impact of decisions on employee morale	3.36	20.7
12	My library gives staff choices in their work assignments	3.37	18.7
13	My library invites staff to contribute to the library's vision	3.37	20.2
14	My library helps staff balance work and family	3.41	24.7
15	In my library, leaders empower others to help carry out the library's vision	3.42	22.2
16	My library encourages everyone to bring the users' views into the decision making process	3.56	26.3
17	My library gives staff control over the resources they need to accomplish their work	3.64	28.3
18	My library encourages staff to get answers from across the library when solving problems	3.65	27.8
19	My library works together with the outside community to meet mutual needs	3.74	33.3
20	My library enables staff to get needed information at any time quickly and easily	3.74	27.8
21	My library encourages staff to think from a global perspective	3.88	35.9
22	In my library, leaders mentor and coach those they lead	3.99	35.4
23	My library makes its lessons learned available to all employees	4.12	40.4
24	In my library, leaders ensure that the library's actions are consistent with its values	4.30	47.5
	All Statements	3.44	19.7

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and my library measures the results of the time and resources spent on training (mean=2.89). The highest mean scores were: *my library makes its lessons learned available to all employees* (mean=4.12) and *in my library, leaders ensure that the library's actions are consistent with its values* (mean=4.30). The rest of the 20 items which comprise 83.3% have mean scores between 3.08 (*in my library, leaders generally support requests for learning opportunities and training*) and 3.99 (*in my library, leaders mentor and coach those they lead*).

Results show that only 8.3% of all the 24 items have the mean score of 4.0 or above. Even though there are some statements with mean scores nearer to the "neutrality", however, in general the results demonstrated that very few respondents agree that organizational level learning do exist in their libraries. On the other hand, the overall mean score (mean = 3.44) is not enough to indicate that Yemeni university libraries are learning organizations. This finding is almost in line with a study done by Norliya and Azizah (2006). Although the mean scored higher than that scored in this study, however, according to them, their findings showed that the university libraries in Klang Valley, Malaysia cannot be considered as truly learning organization, considering the overall mean scores for individual learning and team learning are clustered around the mean.

Based on mean scores, it can be said that Yemeni university librarians should understand that learning at the organizational level is considered as a prerequisite for successful organizational change. It is therefore important to establish a learning culture for all librarians at different levels if they want to sustain and compete. Lysyk's (2000) point of view is that what does not happen at the individual level cannot happen at the organizational level. In addition, Yeo (2003) affirms that the learning at the organizational level cannot occur without the proper institutionalization of individual and team learning.

Based on results, it can be argued that one of the important reasons of the low presence of organizational learning is due to the absence of the role of leaders. Al-Zamany, Hoddell and Savage (2002) raise the issues of improving the job that connected with activities in leadership criterion in Yemeni public organizations. Literatures emphasize that in the learning organization, leaders are responsible for fostering and encouraging learning culture and building shared vision. Watkins and Marsick (1993) and Marsick and Watkins (2003) state that learning culture and the

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changes occurs within the organizations by building a learning climate and culture that built by leaders and other key people. Norliya & Azizah (2007b) affirm that the top management should realize the compelling learning need of their librarians by making learning intentional at all times and in all locations. Senge (1990) in turns argues that learning organizations require a new view of leadership. He sees that in a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models.

Perceptions of Organizational Level Learning by Type of University

The results of comparison as displayed in Table 3 showed that a significant difference was found in librarians' perceptions with regard to the type of university and the organizational level learning. Mean score rating for private university librarians was higher than mean score for public university librarians. This means that conducive learning environment in private universities is better than that exist in public universities. Based on the result of comparison, the null hypothesis of there is no significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between the public and private university librarians was rejected. This result is in line with Norliya and Azizah (2005b)'s study which concluded that librarians from private university libraries have a more positive perception about the existence of learning at the organizational level than do librarians from public university libraries.

Table 3: The Mann-Whitney *U* Test results on perceptions of organizational level learning between public and private university librarians

	Type	N	Mean	<i>p</i> -value
Organizational Level Learning	Public	163	93.71	0.002*
	Private	35	126.46	

* Significant at the 5% significance level

Perceptions of Organizational Level Learning by Role Groups

The results of comparison as displayed in Table 4 showed that no significant difference (*p*-value higher than the recommended 0.05 level, *p*=0.123) was found on the librarians' perceptions with regard to their role and the organizational level learning. Thus, the

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null hypothesis of there is no significant difference regarding the perceptions of organizational level learning between senior and middle-level librarian was substantiated.

Table 4: The Mann-Whitney *U* Test results on perceptions of organizational level learning between role groups

	Role Groups	N	Mean	<i>p</i>-value
Organizational Level Learning	Senior-level librarians	63	108.68	0.123*
	Middle-level librarians	135	95.21	

* Not significant at the 5% significance level

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that the mean scores of learning practices at the organizational level were not enough to consider Yemeni university libraries as learning organizations. Only two (8.3%) of the 24 items have mean scores of 4.0 indicating that the libraries cannot be seen as learning organizations.

The result of comparison showed that a significant difference was found in the librarians' perceptions with regard to their type of university and the organizational level learning. The mean score rating for private university librarians is higher than mean score for public university librarians. This could mean that private university libraries have an environment that is conducive to learning. On the other hand, the result of comparison between the senior and middle-level librarians shows that there is no significant difference between them.

The impetus of this first effort to examine the perceptions of organizational level learning practices in Yemeni university libraries was to understand to what extent these libraries practice organizational learning. Undoubtedly, assessing learning practices and providing university libraries with a tool to help them to figure out their activities in this regard is a crucial need. Previous studies conducted on Yemeni university libraries mainly centered on uncovering the absence of training opportunities and the claim for financial support for training.

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Marsick and Watkins (1994) state that it is essential to understand the practices and principles that makes up the learning organization. They argue that the learning organization is not a prescription, but rather a model or guide for the examination of current practices. Similarly, West (1994) argues that as organizations are essentially constructions they cannot learn within the confines of our present limited understanding of the term.

Since the concept of the learning organization in Yemen is a relatively new issue, and based on the result of this study, it is believed that the low presence of organizational level learning is because of the absence of learning environment. Thus, the results derived from this study require and force Yemeni university libraries to review their learning and training plans and programmes, and carry out further efforts to support learning practices that transform these libraries to the age of learning organizations. In this regard, the results of the study suggest putting into consideration the importance of the leader's role in fostering organizational learning practices. Norliya and Azizah (2007a) indicate that the library management should motivate the employees to freely pass on newly acquired knowledge in order to create a corporate climate for continuous learning. In addition, to strengthen educational process in university libraries, it is important to pay conscious attention to encourage learning practices at the organizational level by encouraging librarians to participate in a range of educational activities apart from their routine tasks (Norliya and Azizah 2006).

It is hoped that the assessment tool used in this study has participated in providing a valuable tool for assessing learning culture. Undoubtedly, this or other tools will help practitioners to enrich the Yemeni context with different empirical studies that develop organizational learning as a prerequisite step toward building learning organizations.

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