

Schnellbaecher, Benedikt; Diefenbach, Ulf; Millemann, Jan

Conference Paper

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Provided in Cooperation with:

IRENET - Society for Advancing Innovation and Research in Economy, Zagreb

Suggested Citation: Schnellbaecher, Benedikt; Diefenbach, Ulf; Millemann, Jan (2015) : Putting the Individual in Ambidexterity – Identifying Activities to Achieve Organisational Ambidexterity and Long-Term Survival, In: Proceedings of the ENTRENOVA - ENTERPRISE RESEARCH INNOVATION Conference, Kotor, Montenegro, 10-11 September 2015, IRENET - Society for Advancing Innovation and Research in Economy, Zagreb, pp. 57-63

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/183631>

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Putting the Individual in Ambidexterity – Identifying Activities to Achieve Organisational Ambidexterity and Long-Term Survival

Benedikt Schnellbaecher, Ulf Diefenbach
EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht, Germany
Jan Millemann
Saarland University, Germany

Abstract

Vast research is dedicated to enable companies to exploit existing knowledge to optimize processes as well as to explore new ways to conduct business. In other words how to achieve organisational ambidexterity. Previous research focuses mainly on ambidexterity at organisational or business unit level. Only few papers provide answers for academics or practitioners, what specific individual activities have to be pursued for ambidexterity. The aim of the paper is to mitigate this research gap by screening research on organisational ambidexterity and filter out findings concerning individual ambidexterity. Applying a systematic review approach, the paper reviews academic literature and identifies knowledge seeking and knowledge offer as the core activities of individual ambidexterity. Building on this, a review is conducted to identify the antecedents of knowledge seeking and offer. Finally, the antecedents are structured according to its relevance in the knowledge adoption process. Thus, the paper contributes to research by providing a state of the art, conceptual base for further investigations into the individual ambidexterity topic.

Keywords: Organisational ambidexterity, Individual ambidexterity, Knowledge seeking, Knowledge offer

JEL classification: O31, D83

Introduction

Long-term success of an organization relies on exploring new competences while exploiting existing competences by polishing and harnessing them (Levinthal and March, 1993; March, 1991). Vast research is dedicated to understand, how such organisational ambidexterity can be achieved (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Raisch et al., 2009; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013; Simsek, 2009). Much attention of the scientific community focused on the organisational level and business unit level to evaluate organisational ambidexterity (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Despite of the significance of this perspective, the realisation of ambidexterity depends on the behaviour and interaction of multiple levels in an organisation (Chandrasekaran et al. 2012; Mom et al., 2009; Raisch et al., 2009). Hence, calls for research on ambidexterity in multiple levels and especially on individual ambidexterity increased over time (Ferreira et al., 2014; Kortmann, 2014; Mom et al., 2007; Mom et al., 2009; Raisch et al., 2009, Lin et al., 2007, Lavie et al., 2010).

The aim of the paper is to mitigate this research gap by screening research on organisational ambidexterity and to filter out findings concerning individual ambidexterity. Thus, the paper contributes to research by providing a state of the art, conceptual base for further investigations into the individual ambidexterity topic. The paper is structured by initially scrutinizing the theoretical background of organisational and individual ambidexterity. Subsequently, the paper is divided into two systematic review studies. First, the paper compliments previous research by taking stock of existing insights into individual ambidexterity using a systematic review method, which is discussed in detail (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). The review asserts the key activities of knowledge seeking and knowledge offer for individual ambidexterity. Secondly, a systematic review of knowledge and information research literature is conducted to collect existing, investigated antecedents of knowledge seeking and knowledge offer. Subsequently, the antecedents are structured according to the innovation decision framework by Talke and Heidenreich (2014). Finally, the results of the results of the two systematic review studies are discussed and future research avenues are derived from the findings.

Theoretical background

The foundation of ambidexterity as well-noted research field can be seen in an influential article of Tushman and O'Reilly in 1996. The article proposed organisational ambidexterity as the answer to the riddle of how organisations may explore new and exploit existing competences (Levinthal and March, 1993; March, 1991). Organisations with the capability to conduct both activities may prosper in the long run (Levinthal and March, 1993) and also experience superior performance (He and Wong 2004, Lubatkin et al. 2006; Patel et al., 2012).

The understanding of how to achieve ambidexterity differs significantly between the different research streams of ambidexterity: contextual ambidexterity (e.g. Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004) and structural ambidexterity (e.g. Jansen et al., 2009). Orthodox supporters of structural ambidexterity might argue that the proposed individual decision to invest one's time in exploration or exploitation activities by contextual ambidexterity is rather limited for front-line staff (, in particular for non-managerial employees). In the case of radical changes in the organisations environment, it is doubtful that front-line staff or employees are able to act exploratory without the intervention and backing of senior management (e.g. technology shocks) (Kauppila, 2010). Hence, "true" ambidexterity is non-achievable on the employee level, but only through division of labour.

This debate above reflects a shortcoming of organisation ambidexterity literature. Independent of the ambidexterity approach in question, it is hindered by its lack to define the concrete activities included in the concepts of contextual and structural ambidexterity modes and subsequently ambidexterity itself (O'Reilly and Tushman 2013). The complexity increases, if one grasps ambidexterity as a multi-level construct due to its various shapes on different level (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013).

The first study paper attempts to mitigate the research gap by reviewing the ambidexterity literature to clarify organisational ambidexterity on an individual level, thus answering the call for insights of ambidexterity practices on an individual level (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013; O'Reilly and Tushman 2013; Raisch and Birkinshaw, 2008).

Study 1

Methodology

A systematic review aims to extract and condense findings from the literature (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). The aim of the review approach is to provide a transparent structure to scrutinize the literature. Thus, others may be able to retrace the steps of the analysis and build on the results. The fleshed-out procedure is derived from Bartels and Reinders (2011). A two-tier approach is chosen to gain a systematic understanding of individual ambidexterity.

Firstly, the data bases Emerald Management Xtra, Elsevier ScienceDirect and EBSCO Business Source Complete are scrutinized using various search term combination for "individual", "ambidexterity", "exploration" and "exploitation". The applied parameters limited the search to scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals. Publications which contained the search terms in its titles or in its abstract were included for further study

Secondly, the autonomous collection was complemented with an annual search for further peer-reviewed articles by considering academic journals, which conduct research in the area. Starting point for this were journals which were identified in the autonomous collection as well as referenced journals in those publications (e.g. Organization Science, Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Product Innovation Management).

The data pool of the autonomous search was selected in an iterative process (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). In a first step, the titles and abstracts were analysed to grasp the article's understanding of ambidexterity and its relationship to ambidexterity research. The step resulted in 250 articles in the data set, which can be categorized as part of organisational ambidexterity. Subsequently, the data set was screened to filter out publications, which were mentioned several times due to their existence in multiple data bases. The remaining data set consisted of 224 articles. Eventually, publications were limited to highly-ranked journals of C or above (according to VHB Jourqual 3). In total the data set contains 182 scientific publications of highly-ranked, management literature.

Results and Discussion

The 14 publications containing all search term ("Ambidexterity", "Exploration", "Exploitation"; "Individual") play naturally a key role in the analysis. Nonetheless, further analysis is not limited to these articles. The 14 articles don't include articles like Gibson and Birkinshaw's ground-breaking article to contextual ambidexterity in the year 2004, which set the tone for subsequent research on individual ambidexterity, shows the need to engulf all 183 for deeper analysis.

The variance of definitions and studied ambidextrous activities is impressive. As previously discussed, one reason for this is the characteristic of ambidexterity as multi-level construct (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013). Despite of the variance of described activities a common mechanism of ambidextrous individuals emerges and in extension of the activities, which qualify those individuals as ambidextrous. Individual ambidexterity requires the seeking of new knowledge as well as the cooperation with others to acquire such knowledge (e.g. Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004). Moreover, such knowledge flows are not a one-way street. Ambidexterity also requires knowledge offers in an organisation to enable the identification of exploration and exploitation-related opportunities (e.g. Mom et al., 2007; Mom et al., 2009).

Study 2

Methodology

The second study also relies on a systematic review to screen the academic literature for antecedents of the identified core activities of individual ambidexterity, knowledge seeking and knowledge offer. Analogous to the first study, the review approach of Denyer and Tranfield (2009) as well as the previous procedures were chosen (Bartels and Reinders, 2011).

The search covered the search variations of “knowledge seeking” and “knowledge offer”. In the iterative search procedure, the search term “knowledge contribution” was added later on due to usage of the term synonymously with our understanding of knowledge offer in the information research literature. The search resulted in 79 peer-reviewed, management publications. Analogous to study 1, the data set was sorted according to its abstracts and the publications journal rankings (including journals C and above). The final data pool contains 16 peer-reviewed, management publications.

Results and Discussion

Up to date knowledge management and information management literature is able to provide antecedents of knowledge seeking (Table 1) and knowledge offer (Table 2). These antecedents enable or drive both types of activities. Nonetheless, the literature is not able to differentiate these between exploration and exploitation orientation. Thus, it is not possible to estimate the value of the antecedents on various balances of individual ambidexterity.

Table 1

Antecedents of knowledge seeking

Unreflected antecedents	Reflected antecedents
Openness to change Status quo satisfaction	Perceived value of knowledge Expected absorptive capacity Hierarchical/power relationship Social reciprocity Trust Social cost

Source: Authors

Table 2

Antecedents of knowledge offer

Unreflected antecedents	Reflected antecedents
Openness to change Satisfaction with community	Expected absorptive capacity Social reciprocity Trust Uncertainty of knowledge value Performance expectancy Status altruism

Source: Authors

Limitations and future research

Keeping in mind the goal to shed light on the contents of individual ambidexterity, one major limitation of the article is surely its inability to separate knowledge seeking and knowledge offer in the dimensions of exploration and exploitation. Found antecedents of seeking and offer have to rely on information research and knowledge management literature, which doesn't differentiate between the concepts. Hence, further research is required to determine to what degree the antecedents apply to exploration-oriented and exploitation-oriented activities.

Moreover, the screened literature is (partly) qualitative in nature (e.g. case studies). Further empirical studies measuring exploration as well as exploitation seeking and offer in practise would be able to validate the findings and the assertion that the activities result in beneficial organisational performance.

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About the authors

Benedikt Schnellbacher is Research Assistant and Doctoral Candidate at the Strascheg Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht, Wiesbaden, Germany. His research focuses on enabling organizations to handle the demands of innovation-oriented as well as traditional process activities. Author can be contacted at: benedikt.schnellbaecher@ebs.edu

Ulf Diefenbach is Research Assistant and Doctoral Candidate at the Aviation Management Centre at EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht, Wiesbaden, Germany. His main research areas are comprehensive management and control systems as well as organizational change processes especially regarding Airlines and the Aviation Industry. Author can be contacted at ulf.diefenbach@ebs.edu

Jan Millemann is Research Assistant and Doctoral Candidate at the Saarland University, Saarbrücken, Germany. His main research areas are service innovation as well as resistance to innovation. Author can be contacted at jan.millemann@uni-saarland.de