# Organisational Learning in India: Creating the Organisational Learning Space

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**Abstract.** Indian organisations have transformed organisational learning to face multiple challenges posed by external market conditions, legal and regulatory considerations and internal factors. The way Indian organisations have developed their learning platforms and learning delivery has been instrumental in equipping a global workforce with the required knowledge and skills. This has, in turn, reduced time-to-market and built up a repository of knowledge and a culture of learning through correct assessment of the socio-cultural nuances that are congenial to organisational learning in India. This paper is aimed at finding out how organisations in India have been able to do that and what kind of learning delivery methods and techniques provide a good learning experience for employees in Indian organisations, forming the basis for an *Organisational Learning System.*

**Keywords:** Indian organisations, Learning methodology, Success parameters, Organisational Learning Space, Learning delivery, Knowledge Management.

## 1 Introduction

This paper is exploratory in nature and aims to reveal some of the strategies adopted by successful Indian organisations to implement learning platforms required for continuous growth. This paper also discusses how corporate India has integrated the historical Indian learning system of peer-to-peer learning and sharing under an instructional and mentored learning design to create a contemporary learning model integrated with the employee self service tools and knowledge management systems of the organisations.

### 1.1 Design of the paper and method of data collection

The aim of this paper is to identify the various learning methodologies used in Indian organisations for an effective learning experience. The outcome of this paper is to establish the fact that the market-responsiveness of Indian organisations today is primarily due to establishment of a successful learning system rooted in the preferences of the learners (employees) that is implicitly influenced by cultural and historical learning roots in India based on peer-to-peer mentored learning.

Data was collected through telephonic interviews and questionnaires sent through electronic medium (e-mails), to over 60 employees (HR Executives/Managers, Knowledge Management champions and HR Information systems specialists) in more than 50 small, mid and large-size organisations in India. The questionnaire was further administered to more than 60 junior employees (0-5 years of work experience), middle-level employees (5-15 years of work experience) and senior employees (15+ years of work experience) of the same organisations to gauge the learner-preferences. Responses received were from across industries, but skewed towards Information Technology/Information Technology-enabled service sectors. Raw data in the form of responses from this population was collated and put into Microsoft's spreadsheet for further analysis.

## 2 Transforming Learning Roots into Organisational Learning

### 2.1 History of Indian Learning System

Indian education and the methodology of learning dates back to historical ages and were primarily driven through education imparted through the "Gurukul" [1] concept, essentially an interactive, peer-to-peer system of education. At the end of the tough and rigorous learning period encompassing multiple subject areas and skills, the students came out to be successful and responsible citizens capable of taking on multiple challenges in life and society through "Kul", which roughly means "domain knowledge". The failure of the "Gurukul" system of education is primarily attributed to multiple conquests from invaders, religious and class/clan complexities, lack of documentation and storage that rendered it an ad-hoc process that passed away with the dilutions over time and also to the comparative lack of speed with and technique through which it was delivered in a non-networked environment.

### 2.2 Learning from the Historical System

A knowledge of the success (and failure) of the Gurukul system and other historical learning methodologies have helped Indian organisations develop parameters required for creating what I will term as "Organisational Learning Space (OLS)" and strategically link the OLS to business drivers, market environment and internal human resource (HR) structure and processes like performance appraisal, succession planning, development and growth, rewards and recognition, as modelled below.
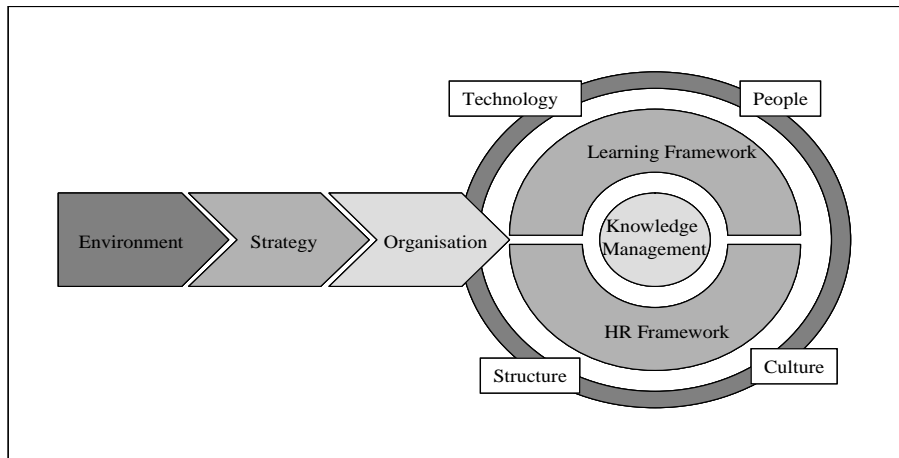


**Fig. 1.** Organisational Learning Framework in response to the market-facing factors.

Indian organisations have been able to recognise each knowledge category (Historical, Cultural and Functional knowledge) separately, and have been able to "discover", "codify" and "migrate" invisible knowledge through the OLS. The model below, adapted from Takeuchi and Nonaka's model, shows the cycle of knowledge that Indian organisations have attempted to capture.

[1] *Guru* refers to "teacher" or "master"; *Kul* refers to his domain
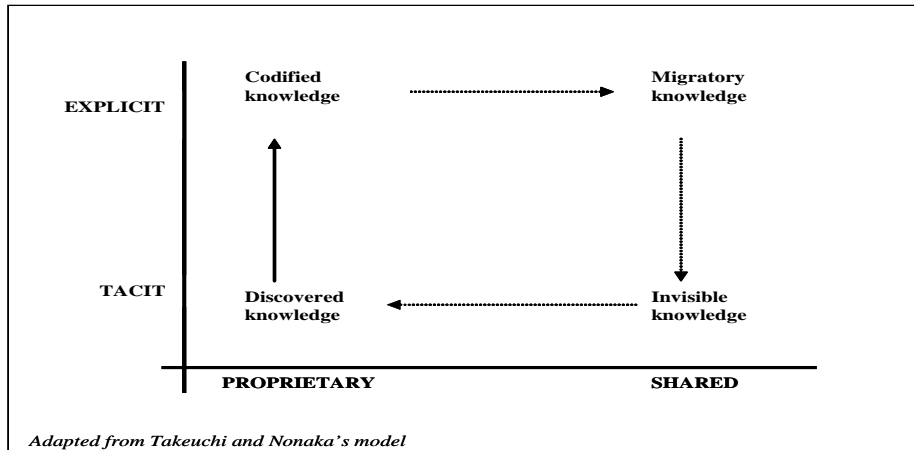
**Fig. 2.** Knowledge Circle model, adapted from Takeuchi and Nonaka's model

Organisations high on the learning methodology path have attempted to capture data/information sources scattered in various pockets of the organisation (sales departments, general white papers, legal department, staffing and financial departments, etc), filter the artefacts, classify and tag the information with the appropriate metadata for easy storage, search and dissemination. This way, an organised repository of knowledge has been built up, serving the needs of learning based on role-based access to these knowledge repositories (groups and individuals) through logical and/or virtual views defined in the knowledge management repositories, making it easy for the user to search and navigate to solutions or approaches to a problem, on a case-management solution approach.
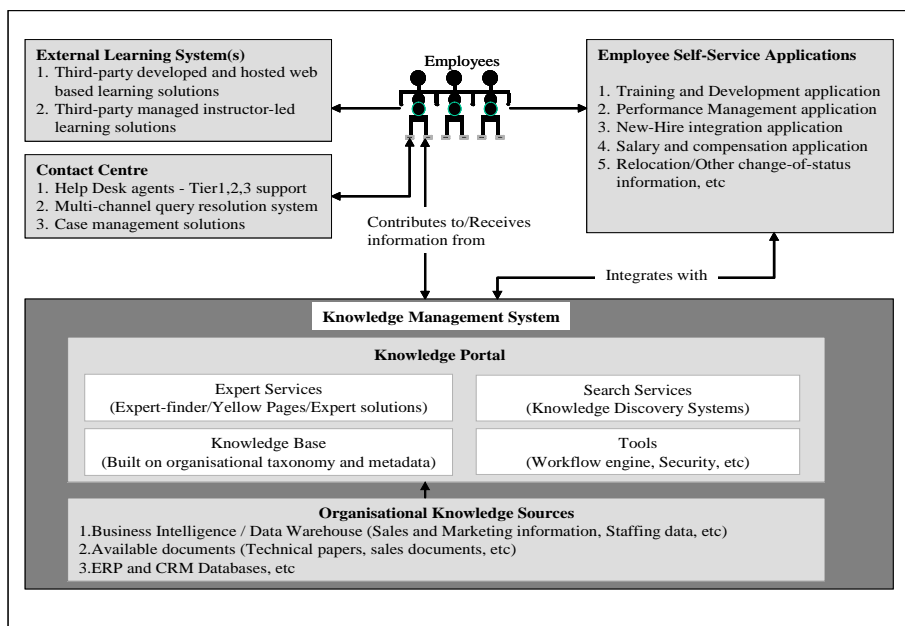


**Fig. 3.** Organisational Learning Space model: Integration with Knowledge Management, Employee Self-service and Learning frameworks.

This model of learning integrated with the knowledge management system of the organisation has helped in improving employee productivity, reduce time-to-market, retain and share knowledge and use that for proactive decision-making, enhance collaboration and reduce costs associated with learning content development and delivery. Indian organisations, for example have not embraced technology as a means to deliver training – they actually tend to use technology as an expediting medium to

encourage peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge. Somewhat like Japanese organisations[2], Indian organisations have invested in trying to understand the psyche of its employees and have established a more shared and interactive learning platform aligning with the collectivistic culture that is inherent in the Indian society.

Establishing the OLS has been based on understanding the learning needs of the organisation - "Education and growth needs" have been identified as necessary for re-skilling the existing labour pool taking into consideration business downturns, downsizing, future employability, penetration into emerging/new markets etc. "Learning-as-an-entertainment needs" have been identified as creating a space that is conducive to learning and fun. "Market-facing competency needs" have been identified to reduce time-to-market and diffuse issues arising out of a geographically spaced-out workforce. Similarly, "Innovation needs" have been identified for a leaner way of productivity increase through reducing re-work, utilising and leveraging existing processes and tools. To meet each of these needs, the OLS has been adapted to incorporate different learning techniques, methodologies, processes, tools and applications like corporate blogs, online libraries, sales repositories, knowledge and discussion rooms, etc.

### 2.3    Key Success Factors

One of the most important success factors behind a successful OLS was to get the learning-initiative coordinates right, in order to ensure value-on-investment. The factors fuelling this success are not just knowledge of tangible factors (simple vendor analysis, cost, time and project management) but also that of intangible, invisible ones. The first success factor is a deep understanding of the People-Process-Culture factors that determines, affects and is influenced by the "learn-ability" index of the target population of learners. The second factor is the correct feasibility-analysis of organisational learning with respect to the organisational infrastructure, thereby setting the foundation right – which means rationalizing the existing resources, infrastructure, tools and applications and strategically link these entities to other HR processes. The third factor is a dedicated focus on internal processes and process-streamlining, without an immediate plan of converting the training initiative to a profit-centre one. The fourth factor is a well-researched learning/training outsourcing initiative to avoid non-core, but critical requirements like compliance. The fifth factor is concentrating on subject-matter expertise and "keeping the right people on board" from the project management perspective, for all projects related to learning and development – This means exercising greater control over project movements by keeping the ownership of the HR projects under control and avoiding big-bang implementations.

## 3.    Summary of Findings

The conclusions provide an indication of the way Indian organisations customise their learning strategies to respond to learners' preferences. There is a high inclination to interactive learning (physical, instructor-led) rather than through web-based learning alone. Some of the organisations have been able to reduce costs on external training (instructor-led or third-party developed-and-hosted web based learning) by building-on and leveraging available knowledge repositories of the organisation.

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[2] Cross-cultural influence on organisational learning: the case of Japanese companies in China, Jacky F. L. Hong, Working paper presented to Organisational Learning Conference, Lancaster University, June 1999

Organisations cited the success of the OLS to an effective integration of the learning management system with other strategic and automated HR applications (through Employee Self-service portals with single-sign on facilities) over the intranet/internet. Very few organisations actually have multilingual learning portals. Most organisations have a mix of in-house and outsourced training programs (60%), with a few cases of end-to-end outsourced training programs. Around 40% of the organisations have some type of executive programs geared specifically for executives, and these are high-budget internal, external or a blend of both. These programs are strategically linked to HR initiatives of succession planning, promotions and critical workforce deployments. 60% of the respondents stated that they have dedicated investments in learning centres (infrastructure facilities, instructors, etc) and some Indian organisations have reward programs for any contributions made to the knowledge repository (Rewards may be monetary, certificates, etc). There have been observed variations in learners' preference with seniority of employment, learning content and delivery method – however, all three levels of employees displayed an almost equal inclination towards instructor-led/peer-to-peer learning in a classroom environment.

## 4.   Caveats, Shortfalls and Opportunities for Further Study

Lack of sponsorship on deeper research on this specific topic has limited reaching out to a larger population.

A secured website developed and used for administering the questionnaire and collecting the responses could have been a more sophisticated way of carrying out this study, rather than telephonic interviews and emails.

More sophisticated analysis techniques are required to refine the findings of the study. This calls for usage of licensed software like the SPSS, rather than MS-Excel which has been used to analyse the data.

Construct and Content validity of the questions may be questioned and therefore requires refinement.

Relating the findings of this study to an international population is expected to be helpful to multiple 'entities', in terms of understanding the relations between learners' preferences and parameters that influence organisational learning. The 'entities' mentioned above may be multinational corporations with a globally-spaced workforce, product vendors on the e-learning space, ERP vendors, etc. Hoefstede's dimensions are recommended as additional study, as are Black, Gregersen and Mendenhall's expatriate-repatriation theories and their application.

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## Appendix A: Graphical Representation of Findings
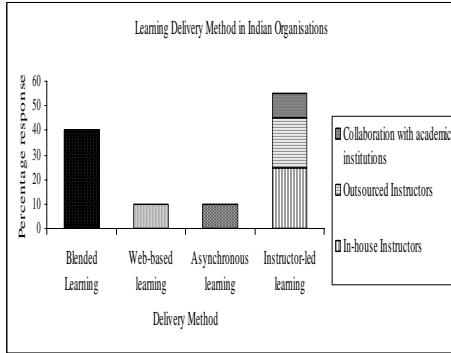
**Chart 1.** Learning delivery methods
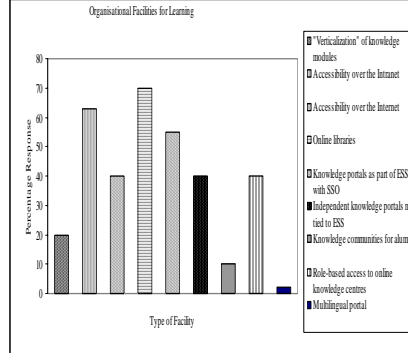


**Chart 2.** Facilities for learning
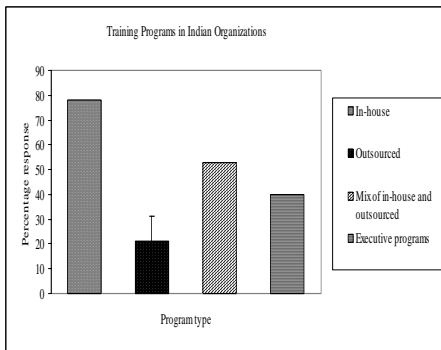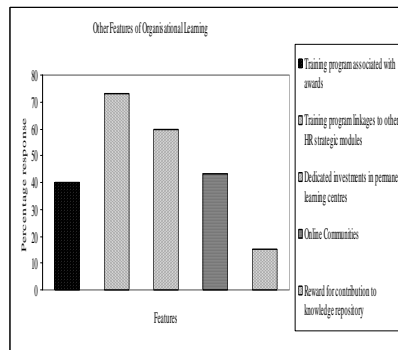


**Chart 3.** Training programs



**Chart 4.** Other features of learning



**Chart 5.** Learners' preferences