

Concepts of Employee Ambidexterity

A Literature-Based Analysis of Paradoxical Behavior on an Individual Level

Dr. Michael Hans Gino Kraft

kraft.mgino@gmail.com

Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences,
St. Gallen, Switzerland

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Abstract – Many companies face the challenge of exploring new business potentials while exploiting internal excellence to meet their market conditions. This results in a mutual limitation of resource capacities and thus to a management task at the individual level. Under this premise, the following article summarizes the arguments and counter-arguments in the scientific discussion about the ambidexterity on a employee level. Although academic interest in the study of individual ambidexterity is growing, there is still a need to understand the different concepts and to classify their potential. For this purpose, the existing scientific literature is compiled according to individual employee behavior, structured and described in its most important results. The review took place between January 2021 and June 2021 by using different academic databases such as Econbiz, Scopus and Web of Science. The sample included 10 articles from a cross-sectoral context. The evidence of the analysis demonstrates that ambidexterity in employee behavior promotes economically useful adaptability within organizations. Practitioners and scientists are invited to cope the potential of individual ambidexterity and to implement ambidextrous behavioral practices in organizational reality.

Keywords – Ambidexterity; Individual Ambidexterity; Employee Behavior; Leadership Behavior, Literature Review

1 Introduction

Economic success often depends on the company's ability to react to changes in the environment. In this context, many recent publications (e.g. Cunha et al., 2019; Ajayi et al., 2017; Kauppila & Tempelaar 2016) postulate that the adaptability of an organization is an key predictor of the responsiveness especially in dynamically perceived surroundings. But how can organizations as a whole and managers and employees in particular develop an economically useful adaptability?

Theoretically, it is postulated that an exclusive orientation of companies towards exploitative activities (improvement of existing resources, products and markets) or exploratory actions (development of new technologies, skills, products) seems less effective and less promising.

In this respect, the organizational theorist James March (1991) recognized that dynamic circumstances require a simultaneous balance of two opposing activity patterns of organizations and provided a conceptual basis through his classification of exploration and exploitation. This so-called ambidextrous perspective enables companies to ensure the efficiency of their financial operations on the one hand and to develop new products or business models on the other. According to Gibson & Birkinshaw (2004), and also He & Wong (2004), it could already be empirically proven that this ambidextrous behavior has a positive effect on company results.

In the present day, an increasing number of scientific papers identify this concept of ambidexterity towards as a key driver for organizations to fulfil company targets in handling with these environmental impacts (Bansal, 2002). The authors Raisch & Birkinshaw (2008), referenced, that the number of studies on ambidexterity in the leading journals of management research has risen from 2004 to 2008.

Due to the thematic synthesis of ambidexterity and flexibility, the respective literature has received increased academic attention in recent years (Alghamdi, 2018; Luo et al., 2018; Cunha et al. 2019; etc.). Although preliminary empirical results are promising, there is still a need to understand and classify the different concepts of ambidextrous behavior at the individual level in relation to the adaptability of an organization (Rosing et al., 2011). In particular due to the numerous different conceptualizations of ambidexterity, researchers are increasingly able to investigate promising behavior at the individual level of employees in this area.

Against this background, the central question motivating this paper is which ambidextrous behaviors at the individual level are most promising in terms of adaptability needs? Additional work in this field is necessary to understand the effectiveness of ambidexterity in behavior and to tap into any potential for human resource development. In this context, the main interest of the study is to explore the perspectives of ambidexterity on the individual level and to contribute to research on flexibility.

2 Theoretical Background

According to Rosing et al. (2011), a number of studies indicate that not only organizations and leaders, but also teams and individual employees have to deal with the tension between exploration and exploitation in order to perform.

In this context, the literature defines an employee as a person who works under a contract of employment. This group of people could also be characterized as workers or employees (Zacher et. al, 2016). Accordingly, employee behavior will be defined as an employees' reaction to a particular situation at the workplace. It describes a behavioral way of activity patterns during their work performance.

Consequently, employee behavior is a central object of investigation in organizational research. This characteristic is justified by the fact that this type of transactional relationship is used to investigate economic exchange in terms of income and performance. In addition, it should be mentioned that

within this exchange expectations (implicit or explicit), promises, deceptions etc. are included. According to Martin (2017), it should be noted that an exact specification of the work performance is often difficult to implement contractually and the transactional relationship is extended by an interpersonal component for task fulfilment.

In this context, Caniëls & Veld (2016) describe that successful companies are characterized by the fact that employees perform a combination of explorative and exploitative behaviors. Exploration in employee behavior means in general to find new ways of accomplishing a task or to solve problems with a new approach. In contrast, exploitation means to use existing resources and methods to generate efficiency in the organization. In this respect, ambidexterity of employees is defined as a behavioral pattern that can emphasize a combination of exploitative and explorative activities within a given period of time (Mom et al., 2006).

According to Gupta et al. (2006), it is important to note that an increase in one behavioral pattern is only at the expense of the other and thus an ambidextrous balance in behavior is neglected. Consequently, an equal combination of explorative and exploitative activities is sought. According to Good & Michel (2013) a cognitive learning perspective of the employees is necessary to achieve ambidexterity in behavior. It can be argued that employees must be intellectually capable of switching flexibly between exploration and exploitation in changing environments.

3 Concepts

What ambidextrous behaviors can employees use to adapt in dynamic contexts? To answer this question there are only a few related literature reviews. In the recently published article by Mu et. al (2020) only empirical contributions to individual ambidexterity in the SME environment are compared with regard to methodology. Martínez-Climent et. al (2019) list a literature review of the results of ambidextrous behavior of managers. Zacher et. al (2016) concentrate on cross-sectoral empirical contributions to individual ambidexterity without going into the specific patterns of behavior.

In this context, it can be stated that there is as yet no literary overview of the different conceptualizations of individual ambidexterity (understood here as the behavior of managers and employees). This research gap is surprising, as already the authors Raisch & Birkinshaw (2008) point out that the number of studies on ambidexterity in the leading management research journals increased from 2004 to 2008. On the basis of this outlined relevance to the topic, this contribution aims to close the gap.

In preparation for the analysis of the individual employee behavior, the keyword terms "ambidextrous", "individual ambidexterity", "ambidextrous employee", "ambidextrous behavior", "ambidextrousness", "ambidextrous collaborators"; "ambidexterity"; "paradoxical employee" and "individual employee flexibility" were entered into the electronically based library system EBSCO, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The review took place between October 2020 and February 2021. The analysis requires only scientific contributions that have already been published in peer-reviewed

journals. The application of the literature analysis led to a final selection of 16 contributions. The following criteria were used for the final selection of the contributions:

- Only scientific contributions and articles from international journals were selected; explicitly excluded from the analysis were working papers, practitioner contributions and guidebooks as well as seminar papers, bachelor and master theses.

- The classification of the scientific studies is made according to the above mentioned main actors in the individual ambidextrous behavior (management and staff behavior). Only contributions that seemed relevant within the framework of this structuring scheme were considered.

- To ensure comprehensibility, only English-language articles from the fields of Business & Economics were used.

The following table provides an overview of the different conceptualizations of ambidexterity on the employee level. To create the list, the articles were sorted by date and edited according to their proposed concept for ambidextrous employees (see Table 1).

Table 1: Different Concepts of Individual Ambidexterity

Year	Authors	Methodology	Concepts
2012	Hafkesbrink, J., Bachem, C., & Kulenovic, D.	Mixed Study	Exploration Competencies vs. Exploitation Competencies
2013	Good, D., & Michel, E. J.	Qualitative Study	Exploitation & Exploration abilities
2015	Keller, T. & Weibler, J.	Quantitative Study	Exploration & Exploitation Behavior on Manager Level
2016	Kauppila, P. & Tempelaar, M.	Quantitative Study	Exploration & Exploration Behavior on Employee Level
2016	Caniëls, M. C., & Veld, M.	Mixed Study	Exploration & Exploration Behavior on Employee Level
2017	Ajayi, M., Odusanya, K. & Morton, S.	Mixed Study	Suggestion orientation & Implementation orientation on Employee level
2018	Luu, T., Rowley, C., & Dinh, K.	Quantitative Study	Exploration Behavior & Behavior in Public Service
2018	Alghamdi, F.	Quantitative Study	Exploration & Exploration Behavior on Employee Level
2018	Luo, B; Zheng, S.; Ji, H.; & Liang, L	Mixed Study	Exploration & Exploration Behavior in Top Management Teams
2019	Cunha, Fortes, Gomes, Rego & Rodrigues	Mixed Study	Empowering vs. Centralizing; Qualifying vs. controlling

4 Discussion

Ambidextrous behavior has been presented in this paper as an integrative approach that seems to be particularly well suited on a theoretical level to deal with increasingly complex organizational and paradoxical challenges. Against this background, one of the biggest challenges in ambidexterity research is to implement practical approaches from the multitude of theoretical concepts (Turner et al., 2015). In this context, the following courses of action can be identified from the literature that are necessary for the practical implementation of ambidexterity for an employee level.

Leadership practices: Organizations develop complex leadership structures with many control mechanisms as they grow in size. This leadership rewards internal excellence and perfect execution. However, what can be useful for exploitation can at the same time limit explorative action. In this context, Alghamdi (2018) describes the need for independent decisions, which can be fostered by flat structures and a culture in which people are allowed to experiment and fail without risking their jobs.

Application of long-term budgets: To keep entrepreneurial risk manageable, organizations strive for security and predictability. Investments are planned in long cycles and calculated with business cases, budgets are controlled and evaluated. This approach impairs the development of organizational ambidexterity, because budget invests mainly into (seemingly) safe projects and established markets.

At the same time, it takes a very long time before new initiatives can be launched if there are new insights, a changed environment or increased competition. The budget perspective is also a very interesting component, as it hardly plays a role in the ambidextrous literature. Only in scattered contributions, such as Luo et al. (2018) and Birkinshaw & Gibson (2005), the financial relevance is mentioned, but not with regard to ambidextrous design in everyday practice.

Coherent organizational strategy: When projects are initiated for exploration, they mainly generate costs in the short term. So it happens that innovation projects can lose importance in the company's prioritization alongside day-to-day business. In this context, Cunha et al. (2019) describes ambidexterity as being integrated into the company's strategy and focused on value creation. Only then will employees be able to make sense of it and use their behavior correctly.

Compatible processes: Exploration teams need empowerment and transparency. In a dual organizational form, however, they still have to comply with the regulations of the rest of the company: Reporting, coordination meetings, approval processes, steering committees. In addition, there are guidelines on which data or information may be made available to whom. According to Martínez-Climent et al. (2019), this is an essential prerequisite for the successful implementation of ambidexterity at the leadership level. For this, if the processes are incompatible, unnecessary redundancies and long waiting times result. At the individual level, it will be challenging to maintain the motivation of employees in routine work and to address risks at an early stage.

Complementary interests: Established mechanisms such as target agreements, revenue sharing or bonus levels are mostly geared towards short-term success. Exploring new business areas, however, is a long-term and uncertain venture. Conflicts inevitably arise, for example, when it comes to testing a new product on the market or recognizing innovation teams for their work, even if they do not yet contribute much financially to the overall result. In this context, Ajayi et al. (2017) describe that divergent interests can be reduced and a higher potential value can be achieved through the participation of employees in the target agreement and communication between the task areas.

Promoting ambidexterity from a practical point of view thus requires a holistic approach in which leaders can have to adapt individually depending on the context. For this reason, there is no single blueprint for building an ambidextrous system. Rather, the obstacles described should be overcome in order to be able to unfold an ambidextrous system.

5 Conclusion

Considering the technical and societal developments in recent years and the resulting uncertainties in the business world, both practitioners and scientists are increasingly concerned about business problems and possible solutions. With this paper, I have addressed some of the currently prevailing issues related to adaptability. Focusing on organizational frameworks, this work essentially supports the claim that "Adaptability is fostered by individual ambidexterity". The identified concepts in the review have shown that ambidextrous behavior is positively associated with the improvement of agility-related factors. Surprisingly, my work is one of the few that synthesizes different concepts about ambidextrous behavior at the individual level.

Accordingly, practitioners are advised to pursue the implementation of ambidextrous employee behaviors in organizational reality through appropriate development programs. In this context, HR recruiting measures, leadership behaviors, and even an internal work organization can be aligned with the ambidextrous measures. In summary, while the importance of ambidextrous organizations has increasingly emerged in science and practice, business leaders should also focus on the individual level in order to harness potential in this regard.

6 Author

Michael Hans Gino Kraft, PhD, is a lecture for Business Development & Organization at the Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Science in St. Gallen, Switzerland. Dr. Kraft is a graduate of Management and Organizational Science from the Szent-István University in Hungary. He has published articles in the field of Organizational Science and Leadership in Peer-reviewed international Journals. His current research interests focus on the interface between quality and sustainability management.

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