

Lifelong Learning and Soft Skills Competencies as Competitive Advantage of Service Organizations in the Knowledge Economy

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Abstract: *Organizations are increasingly looking for ways to gain an edge in a rapidly developing knowledge economy. One way to help employees keep up with the latest changes in the industry is to invest in their lifelong learning and soft skills development and to foster a culture of learning. This paper aims to assess the impacts of lifelong learning and soft skills development on service organizations' competitive advantage in the knowledge economy. The research will be done by reviewing literature on critical concepts related to lifelong learning and soft skills in the knowledge economy in general and in the service industry or organizations.*

Keywords: lifelong learning, soft skills, service organizations, knowledge economy, competitive advantage

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is essential for an individual's success both professionally and socially. It helps us to keep up with the changing world around us and to improve our skills and knowledge. (Nørgård, 2021). In today's economy, it's more important than ever to have a commitment to lifelong learning. The knowledge economy is all about creating value from ideas, information and knowledge and that means that life long learning and soft skills increases employability, inclusion and active citizenship. Soft skills are the personal qualities and interpersonal skills that enable someone to interact effectively with others. They are also sometimes referred to as people skills or social skills. Service organizations are under constant pressure especially in today's competitive environment, where companies must compete on price along with quality. While formal degree is important, employers also looking at employability skills. Communication, collaboration, and problem - solving are all essential skills in today's workplace. The goal of this research is to assess how soft skills and lifelong learning development influence or shape the competitive advantage of the service organization in the knowledge economy. The assessment will rely on knowledge - based economy concerning education and training and how lifelong learning and soft skills enhance essential skills, competencies, and knowledge of the people in a service organization (Khalid et al., 2014). The objective is based on the challenges raised regarding the knowledge economy on workers' incompetence due to a lack of crucial skills and competencies in the service industry.

2. Literature Review

Many scholars and researchers have provided information on lifelong learning and soft skills and how it influences the knowledge economy. According to the available scholarly articles and literature, it is evident that lifelong learning and soft skills are the main driving forces in the knowledge economy across all organizations, especially service industries or organizations. Popescu (2012) over views how Romania adopted the lifelong learning strategies and system

from the European perspective to enhance its knowledge economy. It implies that life long learning is gradually incorporated into other industries apart from service organizations to strengthen employee employability skills and improve transferable skills across the world (Popescu, 2012). Other authors also perceives that essential skills required by employers are practical communication, interpersonal skills, problem solving and abilities across every industry (Brown et al., 2003). According to Cedefop (2008), there is a general shift in the primary sector, majorly agriculture and traditional manufacturing industries, to a service and knowledge intensive economy (Cedefop, 2008). According to the author, a significant skill set influences such changes in Europe. It is supported by International Labour Office (2010) that life long learning and soft skills are essential in the service industry to maintain sustainable skills in the whole industry. In its G20 training strategy, the International Labour Office identifies that learning is vital in every industry because it allows employees to gain critical soft and hard skills essential to their work (International Labour Office, 2010). It has facilitated the implementation of such learning as adult learning in several industries supported by the International Labour Office with policies and procedures that help employees to gain knowledge and critical skills.

Employability skills are essential in a service industry or any other industry, and with life long learning, these skills are enhanced. Fadhil et al. (2021) discuss how soft skills influence the employability of graduates across tech companies or industries. According to the authors, all tech industries or organizations are looking for practical approaches to employ staff with strong or applicable soft skills along side hard skills that enhances the achievement of the company goals (Fadhil et al., 2021). Periera (2013) states that enhancing lifelong learning and teaching the learners soft skills ensure that graduates gain vital skills to make them ready for work (Pereira, 2013). In this case, it is a requirement across all tech companies to have candidates with a set of skills and qualifications which influence their employability in the industry. Lazăr and Lazăr (2012) claim that developing human potential using formal and informal learning processes is becoming necessary in the current

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global world. The knowledge economy is growing regarding the exchange of information and technological development. It implies a close connection or relationship between lifelong learning and soft skills and social welfare in the present knowledge economy. (Lazăr and Lazăr, 2012).

Problem Statement

Many economies have depended on skills and knowledge achieved through traditional learning and experiences from real - life practice in individual fields. With time, such experiences are shaped by concepts and facets like technology and social aspects (Wingard and LaPointe, 2015). Despite graduating from university, many graduates have class - earned skills and are required to seek internships and industrial attachment to gain knowledge and experience related to their field of work. However, with time, the facet of lifelong learning and soft skills have become necessary, and it is the most current concept tailored to enhance competitive and complex knowledge - based economies across the world. In today's job market, employers are looking for more than just a degree. They want employees who have the skills and are asset to their company from day one. With the current economies shaped by new technologies, employers employ people based on lifelong learning skills, including professional and employability skills (Meeks, 2017). Lifelong learning and soft skills have become essential in local and international economies because it improves the skills base, promote equality, and reduce social exclusion, leading to the development of the learning industry. For example, soft skills such as interpersonal and practical communication skills are essential and transferable across all industries, and these are employers' primary skills. In this view, most graduates do not possess these skills and, thus, the importance of lifelong learning and soft skills development.

Hypothesis

Service organizations are highly dependent on information and technological changes, practical knowledge, and effective communication in line with multilingualism and understanding of foreign languages (Wingard and LaPointe, 2015). It also calls for competitive interpersonal skills and competence that enhance service delivery to meet local and international economies. Current graduates do not get these skills from classroom learning and do not meet the criteria placed by employers within the service industry because of a lack of competitiveness and the ability to maintain high rapport with customers. Thus the need of having lifelong learning and soft skills development which are essential in the service industry (Luna Scott, 2015).

3. Methodology

The research will use the literature review method to analyze existing pieces of literature and scholarly articles related to the research topic (Majid et al., 2019). It will involve a research assessment based on a thorough literature review to understand critical concepts related to lifelong learning and soft skills in knowledge economy and the service industry organizations.

4. Results & Discussion

According to Nazron, Lim, and Nga (2017), there is an urgent need for lifelong learning and soft skills development in the service industry to enhance the competitiveness of individuals within the organization. This is because the current graduates do not have competencies and skills in line with employers' requirements within the service industry. The results also show that graduates who have obtained their degrees from reputable universities can be more competitive than those who obtained their degrees from less - reputable universities (Stewart, 2017). This is because students who graduate from reputable universities can access higher levels of education than those who graduate from less - reputable universities. This is because reputable universities have higher standards, so graduates are likelier to have met these standards to obtain their degrees (Schaberg, 2019). The outcomes of this study indicate a clear gap between what current graduates know about their professional lives and the requirements of their employers. This gap manifests in career development, soft skills, and lifelong learning. To remedy this issue, service organizations should focus on developing lifelong learning and soft skills competencies as a competitive advantage for service organizations in the knowledge economy.

In terms of recommendations, the need to have lifelong learning and soft skills development is essential in order to be competitive within the service industry. This is because of the rapid technological changes, practical knowledge, and effective communication in line with multilingualism that service organizations need to remain relevant in today's global economy (Nazron, Lim, and Nga, 2017). Current graduates do not get these skills from classroom learning and do not meet the criteria placed by employers within the service industry because of a lack of competitiveness and an inability to maintain a high rapport with customers. To achieve sustainability in this knowledge era, lifelong learning and the development of soft skills are therefore necessary. However, young adults who desire to continue their education after graduation still encounter some obstacles (Saar & Ure, 2013). These include being financially backward at times; being spotted by parents due to their financial status; lack of interest on the part of students towards education; societal pressure on young adults to start earning money to take care of their families, lack of opportunities outside their hometowns and lack of access to quality higher education institutions due to geographical location.

Consequently, the results of this study show that the service industry is highly dependent on information and technological changes, practical knowledge, and effective communication in line with multilingualism and understanding of foreign languages. According to Tikkanen, Hovdhaugen, & Støren (2018), it also calls for competitive interpersonal skills and competence that enhance service delivery to meet local and international economies. Current graduates do not get these skills from classroom learning and do not meet the criteria placed by employers within the service industry because of a lack of competitiveness and the ability to maintain high rapport with customers. Thus, teaching these competencies in universities, colleges, or

institutes that offer courses on these subjects will be beneficial (Schaberg, 2019). This will help them develop their interpersonal skills and competence, enhancing service delivery to meet local and international economies. In addition, it will help them become competitive not only within their organizations but also in other organizations that require more competitive interpersonal skills and competence to serve customers better.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify soft skills competencies that can help service organizations in the knowledge economy to enhance their competitive advantage. The project findings reveal a need for lifelong learning and soft skills development for service organizations in the knowledge economy. The study recommends that companies establish lifelong learning programs to ensure employees' continuous improvement and growth. This study showed a need for lifelong learning and soft skills development in the service industry because of its importance as a knowledge economy. Organizations must adapt their strategies to meet changing environments while maintaining competitiveness and meeting the needs of their customers. When it comes to interacting with customers and building relationships, having strong soft skills is essential. This requires an organization to develop lifelong learning competencies and soft skills throughout its workforce, which will help it remain competitive in a changing environment where new technologies are being introduced constantly.

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