

Adopting a Learning Organization Philosophy to Promote Knowledge Sharing in the University

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Abstract: Higher education institutions, as with organizations in other sectors, are operating in an environment characterized by rapid change, complexity, competition and stakeholder demands. Therefore, these institutions are continuously exploring and adopting effective strategic approaches to survive and remaining competitive. The Learning Organization philosophy is one of the concepts that has been predominantly adopted by organizations in the private sector in order to remain competitive. The aim of this study was to investigate the applicability of a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge-sharing across functional boundaries in a university. The study adopted a survey design underpinned by a post-positivism philosophical worldview. Hence, a cross-sectional design was adopted. Stratified simple random sampling was used to select participants from a population of employees at a University of Technology. The data collection instrument used in the study was a self-administered questionnaire. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. Overall, the findings of the study revealed that the adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy would promote knowledge-sharing beyond functional boundaries in Universities of Technology. Knowledge in an organizational context is regarded as a strategic asset and the Learning Organization is regarded as a philosophy that fosters knowledge creation and sharing. It is through learning that knowledge is created, and knowledge becomes useful when it is shared. Therefore, this study provides organizations, especially Universities of Technology, with necessary insights into the adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge-sharing beyond functional boundaries.

Keywords: Learning Organization, Knowledge-Sharing, Knowledge Management, Continuous Improvement, Higher Education. University of Technology

1. Introduction

To compete and remain relevant in today's turbulent and competitive environment, higher education institutions need to explore effective strategic approaches (Wang and Rashid 2022). Given this context, the aim of this study was to investigate the applicability of a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge-sharing across functional boundaries in the University of Technology. Previous researchers have investigated the knowledge-sharing concept from different perspectives (Santhoshe and Lawrence 2023). This study focuses on knowledge-sharing from a Learning Organization perspective in a university context. In addition, Yoon and Park (2022) argue that few studies have empirically examined individual and organizational factors together in relation to knowledge-sharing. Knowledge -sharing is the fundamental activity that facilitates learning through sharing knowledge to improve organizational processes and products (Chua, Thinakaran and Vasudevan 2023). Furthermore, Igbal and Ahmad (2020) eloquently stated that a Learning Organization has the ability to learn, adapt and outperform competitors. It is therefore critical to have a conducive environment that fosters knowledge-sharing in an organization, hence exploring effective knowledge-sharing strategies becomes critical. Consequently, the focus of the study was to explore the applicability of a Learning Organization philosophy to foster a knowledge-sharing culture in the University of Technology because institutions of higher learning are under pressure to continuously improve their offerings in line with the needs of relevant stakeholders (Jhaj 2019).

1.1 Problem Statement

The lack of an overarching philosophy that is internalized and institutionalized to foster knowledge-sharing within and beyond functional boundaries in a university encumbers knowledge -sharing. Moreover, the prevalence of silo practices in the university is also a challenge, where the focus is more on departmental or faculty goals than broader institutional goals. This is posited by Annansingh et al. (2017), who refer to this problem as knowledge silos in higher education institutions. Proponents of a Learning Organization philosophy, Robbins and Judge (2013) identify the Learning Organization philosophy as a remedy for fragmentation, competition and reactivity in an organization. Bento, Taliabue and Lorenzo (2020) alluded to the fact that a silo mentality creates a problem, with a reluctance to share knowledge across university departments. Furthermore, Yoon and Park (2022) state that there are many barriers to knowledge-sharing in an organizational context.

2. Literature Review

The environment in which universities operate is characterized by globalization, the new economy and a number of other factors (Austin and Jones 2016). Hence, Elenezi (2021) describes the higher education environment as becoming increasingly more competitive. Universities have a role to play, not only in teaching and learning, but also in generating new knowledge to benefit society (Rossouw and Goldman 2023). Therefore, remaining relevant and to survive in such an environment requires adaptive capabilities. This highlights the importance of an overarching philosophy that will encourage the learning and sharing of knowledge in the university. Learning at an individual and collective level has been identified as key to gaining competitiveness (Sarder 2016). In addition, knowledge must be shared within and beyond functional boundaries for universities to respond to the needs of their stakeholders. Rossouw and Goldman (2023) alluded to a need for higher education institutions to continuously review their operations as they advance society in general.

Kinicki and Fugate (2018) describe a Learning Organization as an organization that has the ability to create, acquire and transfer knowledge, and as a result its behavior changes on the bases of new knowledge and insights. Learning in an organization is critical for continuous improvement purposes (Kinicki and Fugate 2016). Moreover, learning in an organization is associated with competitive advantage and innovation. Marquis and Huston (2021) succinctly state that the concept of a Learning Organization was introduced and popularized by Peter Senge. This is also espoused by Ortenblad (2018), who explains that the term 'Learning Organization' was coined by Peter Senge. A Learning Organization has the ability to operate effectively by responding to a rapidly changing business environment (Sarder 2016). Central to the Learning Organization philosophy is the understanding that business models and strategies that were previously effective, have become obsolete and no longer effective to respond to the global economy, as well as changing customer preferences. Watkins and Marsick's (1993) theory underpins this study from a Learning Organization perspective. This theory emphasizes promotion of learning and the effective management of knowledge at all levels of the organization (Nakaziba and Ngulube 2023).

2.1 Continuous Improvement of University Operations

Continuous improvement is generally viewed as a learnt and interiorized capacity that is demonstrated through a set of organizational daily routines (Jurburg et al., 2018). In other words, continuous improvement is an internalized and institutionalized philosophy to inspire a continuous improvement culture across the organization which is necessary to achieve excellence and competitiveness in an environment that is continuously changing (Juburg et al., 2018). Given the importance of continuous improvement, Singh and Singh (2015) have described it as a world-class approach to improving organizational effectiveness. Organizational members at different levels of the organization are encouraged to play their part to improve organizational processes and practices. Therefore, it becomes necessary that a conducive environment is created in an organization to encourage employees to embrace continuous improvement through learning and knowledge-sharing. According to Gasper and Mwenda (2023), the Continuous Improvement concept is receiving attention from all sectors of the economy due to increasing global competition and stakeholder demands. Hence knowledge -sharing plays a central role in continuously improving university operations to meet stakeholder needs.

2.2 Knowledge-Sharing in the University

The knowledge-sharing concept is a knowledge management technique, and it is viewed as the key to gaining competitiveness in an organizational context (Santhoshe and Lawrence 2023). From a theoretical perspective, the Social Exchange Theory underpins knowledge sharing. According to Tsai and Cheng (2012), the Social Exchange Theory covers knowledge-sharing robustly and it is widely used to study knowledge sharing behavior. Yoon and Park (2022) emphasize the importance of having effective systems and a culture that will promote knowledge creation and dissemination in an organization. Universities are competing in a global environment and are thus under constant pressure to continuously improve their services to respond to the needs of their stakeholders (Garcia-Sanchez 2019). The Learning Organization philosophy promotes a strong learning culture across the organization, which fosters the sharing of knowledge. As a result, productivity improves. Chua, Thinakaran and Vasudevan (2023) emphasize that in an organization where knowledge is effectively shared, such a practice leads to organizational effectiveness. Santhoshe and Lawrence (2023) state that in a conducive environment where there is trust and a sense of shared values, it becomes possible for members of the organization to share their knowledge.

2.3 The Learning Organization as a Strategic Choice to Achieve Organizational Effectiveness

Organizational effectiveness is the organization's ability to operate effectively, to remain competitive and to respond to the needs of its stakeholders (Ofor-Douglas 2022). Learning therefore becomes key in this context. Through learning, the organization develops its capacity to adapt in a rapidly changing environment. Ofor-Douglas (2022) further opines that organizational effectiveness is about the effective use and management of the organization's resources to achieve its strategic goals. Defined in simple terms by Ofor-Douglas (2021), organizational effectiveness refers to an organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals. In essence, organizational effectiveness is about the ability to adapt and the continuous improvement of the organization's process and practices. According to Ahmad et al. (2020), organizational effectiveness is key to responding effectively to the needs of the stakeholders. The Learning Organization philosophy creates a conducive environment for knowledge -sharing, which leads to organizational effectiveness. Yoon and Park (2022) concur that organizations need relevant competencies to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a survey design, underpinned by a post-positivism philosophical worldview. Hence, a cross-sectional design was used. The study was quantitative in nature as quantitative data was collected to achieve the objectives of the research. Leavy (2017) describes quantitative research as research characterized by measuring and testing relationships between variables to identify patterns and correlations. This point is posited by Leedy and Ormrod (2019) as well, that quantitative researchers focus on identifying relationships between variables. A sample of 291 participants was selected from a population of 1213 employees of a selected University of Technology. Staff from both the academic and academic support sectors of the university participated in the study. A response rate of 70% was achieved. Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine the reliability of the measuring instrument with an overall reliability score of 0.912.

3.1 Sampling

A stratified simple random sampling technique was used to select the sample from the population. This sampling technique has the advantage of guaranteeing the equal representation of each strata (Leedy and Ormrod 2019). Stratified random sampling is further defined by Trochim, Donnelly and Arora (2016) as a sampling method whereby the population is divided into homogenous sub-groups, then using a simple random sampling in each group to select participants.

3.2 Data Collection Method

Data collection in a research project relates to the technique used to gather a specific type of data (Spickard 2017). A self-administered questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument for this study. The questionnaire contained Likert scale statements. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) mention that questionnaires are popular for quantitative researchers because they can be distributed to a large number of participants.

3.3 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 was used to analyze data. This computer software is regarded as a user-friendly and effective statistical computer program for quantitative data analysis (Gaur and Gaur 2009).

3.4 Profile of Participants

This section presents descriptive statistics based on the biographical information of the participants of the study. Information solicited was in relation to whether participants were part of the academic or administration sector in the university.

3.5 Sector in the University of Technology

The sample constituted participants from two different sectors (academic and administration), as presented in Figure 1 below.

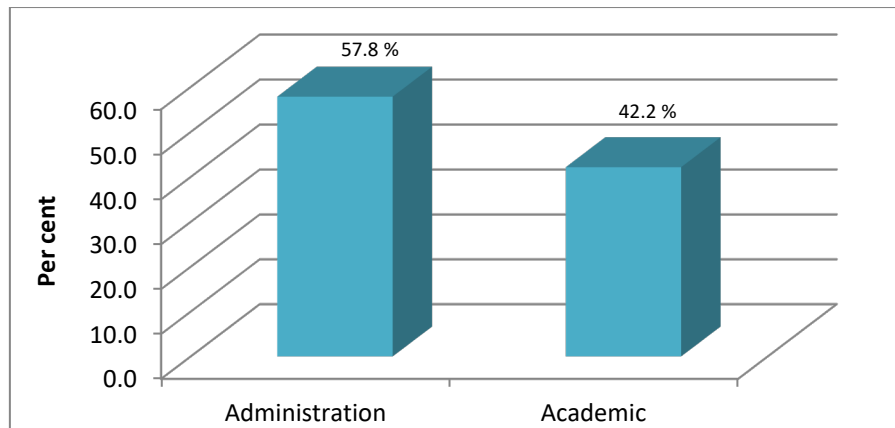


Figure 1: Sector in the University of Technology

The results show that 57.8% of the participants were from the administration sector, and 42.2% from the academic sector. It was found that the number of respondents was almost in the ratio of 6:4 for the administrative and academic sectors. This revealed that the university had more employees in administration than in the academic sector.

3.6 Opportunities for the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy in the University of Technology

This section examined opportunities for the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy at the University of Technology. Figure 2 below presents participants' responses on opportunities for the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy at the university.

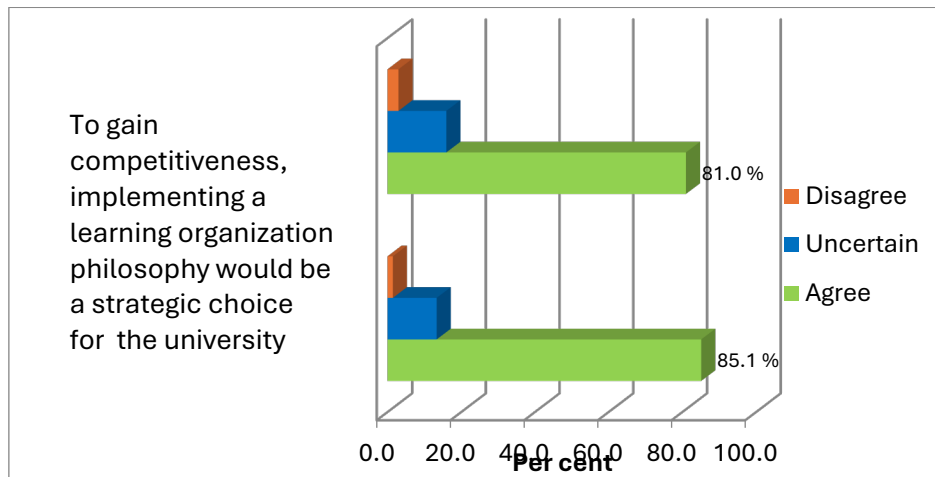


Figure 2: Opportunities for the implementation of a Learning Organisation philosophy

The majority of participants were optimistic that the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy would improve processes and practices in the university. Approximately 85% were of the view that the university would be able to respond effectively to the needs of its stakeholders through the implementation a Learning Organisation philosophy. The results further revealed that 81% of the participants felt that the adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy would be a strategic choice for the university. Lin, Eichelberger and Leong (2020) state that the rapidly changing environment in which universities operate requires new approaches with new perspectives.

3.7 Challenges with the Application of a Learning Organisation Philosophy in the University

Information is presented in Table 1 below on the possible challenges with the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy in the university.

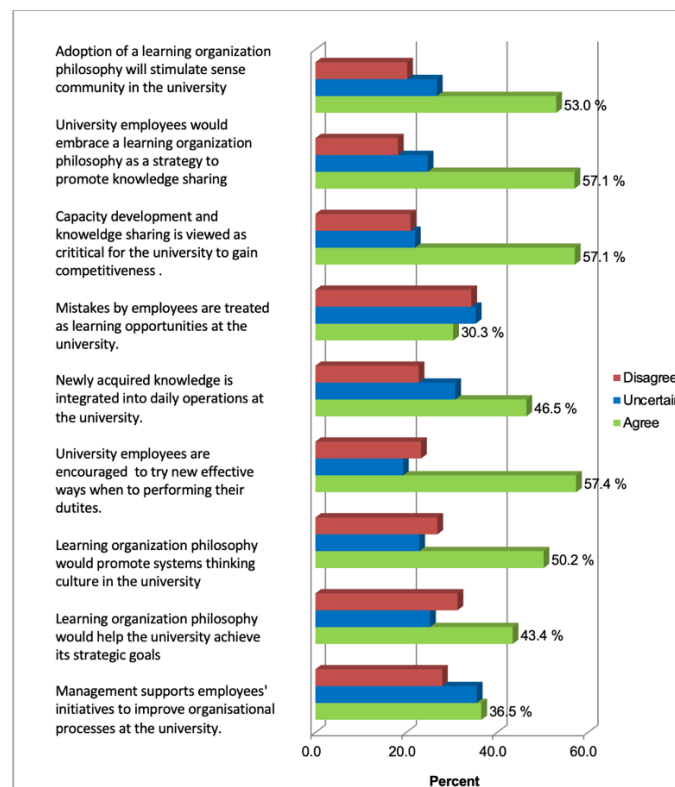
Table 1: Challenges with the application of a learning organisation philosophy

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Lack of staff motivation	72	35.3	39.1	39.1
	Lack of support systems	66	32.4	35.9	75.0
	Lack of a shared vision	40	19.6	21.7	96.7
	Other	6	2.9	3.3	100.0
	Total	184	90.2	100.0	
Missing	System	20	9.8		
Total		204	100.0		

Almost 39.1% of the participants highlighted the lack of staff motivation and 36% identified the lack of support systems. In addition, 22% of the participants felt that the lack of a shared vision might also be a problem for the implementation of a Learning Organization philosophy in the University of Technology. Overall, these are the key challenges identified by participants. Besides these challenges, Wang and Rashid (2022) argue that transforming an organization into a Learning Organization has a number of benefits, mainly the ability to compete.

3.8 University Governance and Institutional Culture From Employees' Perspective

Figure 3 below provides a summary of the responses illustrating the views of participants on university governance and institutional culture.

**Figure 3: University governance and institutional culture**

Overall, the responses show higher levels of agreement for most statements. Comparatively, the findings indicated low levels of agreement on just two statements, namely mistakes by employees are treated as learning opportunities and management supports employees' initiatives to improve organisational processes in the university. Agreement levels on both variables were at 30.3% and 36.5% respectively. The majority of participants indicated that the university is an organisation where employees strive for excellence, at 57.1%; they are encouraged to be innovative, at 57.4%; and capacity development and knowledge sharing is viewed as a priority, at 57.1%. Furthermore, there was a high level of agreement that adopting a Learning Organization

philosophy would stimulate a sense of community, and employees are willing continuously to improve on what they do, at 53.0%. The Learning Organisation philosophy places strong emphasis on the importance of a sense of community within an organisation. Matic (2022) posits that a Learning Organization philosophy has been identified as a strategic option for competing in a highly demanding and rapidly changing environment.

3.9 ANOVA Test Results on University Governance and Institutional Culture

Table 2 below presents ANOVA test output in relation to university governance and institutional culture.

Table 2: ANOVA : Test results on University governance and institutional culture

ANOVA : Employee Perceptions						
	ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy will stimulate sense of community in the university.	Between Groups	.739	1	.739	.606	.437
	Within Groups	239.301	196	1.221		
	Total	240.040	197			
University employees would embrace a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge sharing.	Between Groups	1.805	1	1.805	1.599	.208
	Within Groups	221.371	196	1.129		
	Total	223.177	197			
Capacity development and knowledge sharing is viewed as critical for the university to gain competitiveness.	Between Groups	.209	1	.209	.171	.679
	Within Groups	236.709	194	1.220		
	Total	236.918	195			
Mistakes by employees are treated as learning opportunities at the university.	Between Groups	.792	1	.792	.723	.396
	Within Groups	217.934	199	1.095		
	Total	218.726	200			
Newly acquired knowledge is integrated into daily operations at the university.	Between Groups	1.244	1	1.244	1.214	.272
	Within Groups	200.917	196	1.025		
	Total	202.162	197			
University employees are encouraged to try new, effective ways when performing their duties.	Between Groups	1.224	1	1.224	.982	.323
	Within Groups	249.232	200	1.246		

ANOVA : Employee Perceptions						
	Total	250.455	201			
Adopting a Learning Organization philosophy would promote systems thinking culture in the university.	Between Groups	14.177	1	14.177	10.407	.001
	Within Groups	271.077	199	1.362		
	Total	285.254	200			
Learning Organization philosophy would help the university to achieve its strategic goals.	Between Groups	.269	1	.269	.220	.640
	Within Groups	239.771	196	1.223		
	Total	240.040	197			
Management supports employees' initiatives in improving organisational processes at the university.	Between Groups	6.092	1	6.092	6.016	.015
	Within Groups	197.441	195	1.013		
	Total	203.533	196			

The ANOVA test results in Table 2 reveal variables with statistically significant differences, as well as variables with no statistical significance. These variables relate to perceptions of both academic and administration sectors on university governance. Study variables with a significance difference include: Adopting a Learning Organization philosophy would promote a systems thinking culture in the university, with a p-value of **0.001**; and that university management supports employees' initiatives in improving organisational processes, with a p-value of **0.015**. However, all other variables have no statistical significance.

3.10 Chi-Square Tests Output on University Governance and Institutional Culture

Table 3 below presents Chi-square test results relating to university governance and institutional culture.

Table 3: Chi-square results on university governance and institutional culture

Pearson Chi-Square Tests			
	Sector	Department	
Adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy will stimulate sense community in the university.	0.515	0.134	
University employees would embrace a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge sharing.	0.486	0.022*	
Capacity development and knowledge-sharing is viewed as critical for the university to gain competitiveness.	0.287	0.189	
Mistakes by employees are treated as learning opportunities at the university.	0.082	0.006*	
Newly acquired knowledge is integrated into daily operations at the university.	0.263	0.015*	
University employees are encouraged to try new effective ways when performing their duties.	0.641	0.267	
Adopting a Learning Organization philosophy would promote systems thinking culture in the university.	0.009*	0.137	
Learning Organization philosophy would help the university to achieve its strategic goals.	0.498	0.144	
Management support employees' initiatives to improve organisational processes at the university.	0.182	0.158	

The chi-square results in Table 3 indicate a statistically significant relationship between the academic and administration sectors on the following variables:

University employees would embrace a Learning Organization philosophy as a strategy to promote knowledge-sharing,

Mistakes by employees are treated as learning opportunities at the university,

Newly acquired knowledge is integrated into daily operations at the university.

The results further indicate that with the rest of the study variables, there is no statistically significant relationship between the academic and administration sectors. Study variables with no statistically significant relationship have a **p-value** greater than **0.05**.

3.11 Adaptability and Continuous Learning in the University

This section deals with the continuous learning culture and adaptability in the university.

Figure 4 below presents a summary of the responses.

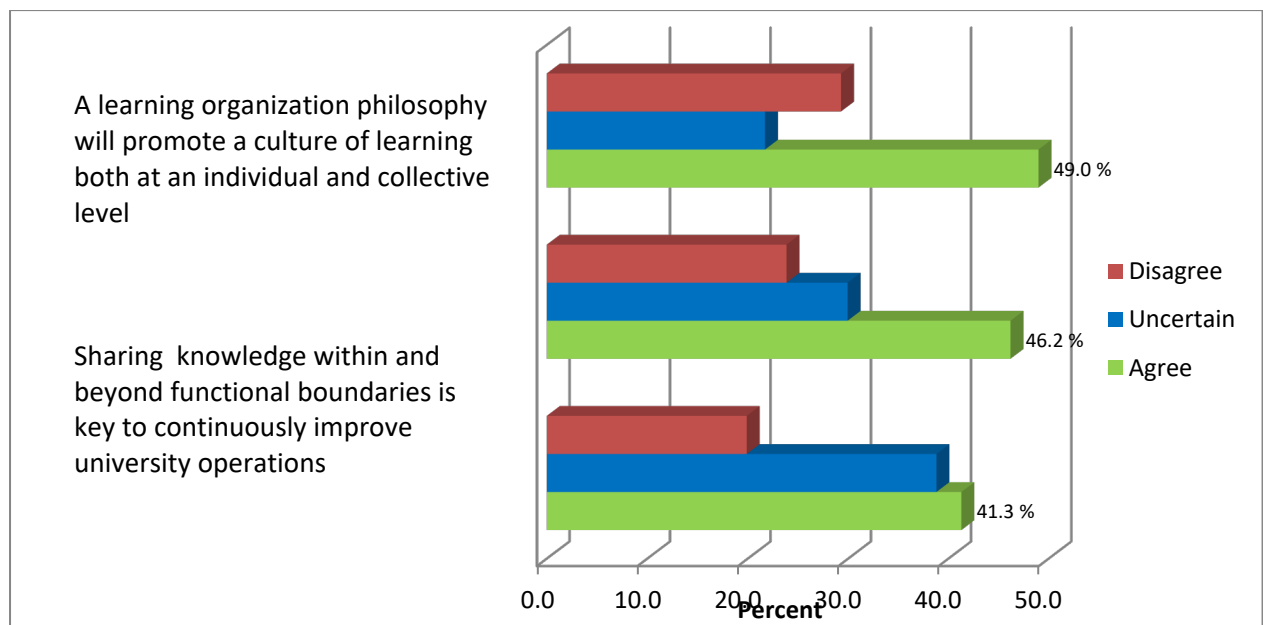


Figure 4: Adaptability and continuous learning in the university

The levels of agreement on all variables are less than 50% in this section. The findings revealed that participants at 49.0% were of the view that the implementation of a Learning Organization philosophy would promote learning at both the individual and collective levels. The results indicate that learning and sharing of knowledge was critical to responding effectively to the needs of the university's stakeholders. Although levels of agreement with statements in this section were less than 50%, the information helps to provide the perspective of participants on statements raised in this section.

4. Results and Discussions

The questionnaires were self-administered to employees of a selected University of Technology and a 70% response rate was achieved from 291 questionnaires.

Based on the findings, participants were optimistic about the implementation of a Learning Organisation philosophy in the university. The results indicate that employees at all levels would embrace the implementation of a Learning Organization philosophy in the university. Importantly, participants were of the view that the implementation of a Learning Organization philosophy would be a strategic decision to promote knowledge sharing in the university. Wang and Rashid (2022), who are proponents of a Learning Organization philosophy, accentuate that becoming a learning organization is critical in a rapidly changing environment. According to Chua, Thinakaran and Vasudevan (2023), knowledge is a key resource for solving problems, making informed

decisions, as well as improving processes and practices in an organization. The results revealed that the university environment was conducive to the implementation of a Learning Organization as a strategy to promote knowledge -sharing in the university. Overall, participants were also optimistic that adopting a Learning Organization philosophy would help the university to achieve its strategic goals, and as a result be able to respond to the needs of relevant stakeholders. Malik and Garg (2020) emphasise that continuous learning and adaptability are key characteristics of a Learning Organization. Participants raised some concerns regarding the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy at the university. However, overall, positive sentiments in the study outweigh the negative sentiments on the application of a Learning Organisation philosophy in the organisation. Hence, knowledge has been identified as a key resource for organizational success. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt, internalise and institutionalize the Learning Organization philosophy as an overarching philosophy to promote knowledge -sharing in Universities of Technology. Based on the findings, it could be concluded that a conducive environment is important to successfully implement a Learning Organisation as a strategy to promote knowledge-sharing in the university.

4.1 Research Contribution

This study has demonstrated that a Learning Organization philosophy is paramount in both creating a conducive environment and fostering a knowledge-sharing culture within and beyond functional boundaries in a university. Practically, this study provides necessary and actionable ideas on the adoption of a Learning Organization philosophy, amongst other things, to promote knowledge-sharing. This study highlights the connection between learning and knowledge. Yoon and Park (2022) argue that knowledge-sharing facilitates new ideas for innovation. Literature on the Learning Organization is copious. However, the Learning Organization has not been researched from a knowledge -sharing perspective in the context of the UoTs. The findings of the study provide necessary insights for UoTs to gain competitiveness. Furthermore, the adoption of a Learning Organization as an overarching philosophy is necessary considering the constant pressure under which UoTs operate to respond to the needs of their stakeholders. As highlighted, learning and knowledge serve as a cornerstone for organizations to compete and remaining relevant in a highly demanding global environment (Matic 2022). This study contributes to the literature by capturing knowledge-sharing from a Learning Organization perspective, in a university context.

4.2 Ethical Requirements

This research project was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the institution. The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Research Committee at the institution. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and participants had to sign a consent form.

4.3 Study Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that it focused on only one University of Technology, which was one of the two Universities of Technology in the province of KwaZulu- Natal, South Africa. This university was selected based on its historical background as it was formed after a merger of two Technikons in 2002.

5. Conclusion

The Learning Organization philosophy serves as an overarching philosophy in an organization where continuous learning and the sharing of knowledge happens beyond functional boundaries. Marquis and Huston (2021) state that knowledge developed through various initiatives in an organization should go beyond the boundaries of individual learning. In other words, acquired knowledge both at an individual or collective level should be shared within and beyond functional boundaries in an organization. It is also further emphasized by Matic (2022) that the ability to learn and effectively manage acquired knowledge is necessary to achieve organizational effectiveness and remain competitive. This study has demonstrated that a Learning Organization philosophy could be used to foster knowledge-sharing in a university.

5.1 Future Research

It is recommended that future research should be extended to include more Universities of Technology. Furthermore, future researchers should investigate or evaluate the impact of a Learning Organization philosophy in relation to the promotion of knowledge-sharing beyond functional boundaries in a university.

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