
Foreword

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The agile organisation is adaptable enough to transform itself into whatever the times require. Designing agile systems, whether they are entire organisations or any of their core elements like production processes, supply-chain strategies, business practices and operating procedures, means designing a sustainable proficiency of change into the very nature of the system. The word 'agility' is used to describe much higher degrees of customisation and flexibility than has hitherto been possible, ensuring that final products meet user requirements.

From the organisational point of view, agile production is achieved when the makeup and relationships of the enterprise's production resources are easily adapted to the precise needs of the moment, and a fleeting moment it is. Agile production systems focus on responding rapidly and directly to customer and user needs.

Two key concepts related to agile organisations are knowledge management and organisational learning. Through these organisational processes, the firm is able to

create, renew, develop, combine and deploy its strategic knowledge base. In this base, there are knowledge stocks that configure the agile capacity of the firm. Therefore, it is interesting to research into how knowledge management and organisational learning contribute to the creation of a long-term capacity in terms of designing agile competitive systems (for example, business practices, operating procedures, production processes, and supply-chain strategies).

The aim of this Special Issue on 'Organisational learning, knowledge management and agile systems and management: synergies' is to present a collection of papers, focused on knowledge management and organisational agility, organisational learning, agile manufacturing systems, supply chain planning, execution, modelling and optimisation of management systems and contemporary management theory, among other topics of interest.

This Special Issue is formed by five papers. The first paper titled 'An information-based model for multi-plant firms' by de Matos Dias and Joia aims to develop, apply and test an information-based model capable of integrating the management of supply chain operations in geographically dispersed companies. The paper uses both case study and action research methods within a representative world-class mining-metallurgical firm (Rio Doce Manganês S.A.).

The second paper, 'Agility, knowledge management, and organisational learning: synergies and inter-relationships', by Jamali and Keshishian, addresses the importance of the ability to survive in an extremely uncertain and dynamic environment. This paper prescribes agility as the new paradigm that shapes business discourse and practice. In this paradigm, knowledge management and organisational learning emerge as key enablers for helping firms to acquire increased agility and responsiveness.

The third paper, 'A language of analytical patterns for the agile enterprise' by Hentrich, discusses a language of analytical patterns for the agile enterprise. This language consists of 12 interdependent patterns on the basis of a holistic approach. Each pattern reflects a certain analysis context and covers relevant influential factors from multiple perspectives using an integral quadrant model analysis methodology at each holistic level. The pattern language provides a guided approach to understanding the complexity and interdependencies between factors from various domains within an enterprise that influence flexibility.

In the next paper, 'Modelling improved customer responses in web-enabled support networks', by Ravi Shankar *et al.*, it states that emerging markets need the manufacturer to offer best after-sale services to counter the competition. Manufacturers offer these services in every customer-territory through authorised centres. Therefore, in expanding customer base, product reliability impacts the daily demand and costs in support services. The paper presents the results of a study that uses stochastic principles to link the cost of customer support and customer response in a territory. The study determines daily demand for support services. Among the outcomes of the study, the authors highlight two important conclusions. First, at a constant daily demand, there is an optimal staffing point in remote services. And second, when the firm improves its response times, the system demands high staffing rates for further improvement in customer response.

The last paper of the Special Issue, 'Collaborative knowledge management systems: a case study from the automotive industry' by Piranfar, focuses on the scientific work developed by Kauffman *et al.* in recent years. The paper aims to explain how evolutionary thinking is coping with the impact of environmental change by redesigning organisations. The paper suggests that too much interaction in the core is harmful, but can

be remedied through modularisation, temporary splits and recombinations. These studies can easily relate to certain types of spin-offs that are meant for recombination rather than for loading off the bad debt.

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