QUALITY CONTENT OF EXPORT MEMORY: ANTECEDENTS AND INFLUENCE ON EXPORT PERFORMANCE

Joseph A. Sy-Changco
Faculty of Business Administration
University of Macau
Av. Padre Tomas Pereira, SJ, Taipa
Macau
Tel: + (853) 397 4721
Fax: (853) 838320
Email: josephs@umac.mo

Abstract

Exporting is still one of the most common ways for organizations to reach foreign markets and its success is often key to sustaining and enhancing overall firm performance. In order to maximize the likelihood of developing sustainable competitive advantage in export markets, exporting organizations now need to learn better and faster than their competitors. This paper examines organizational learning in the context of exporting activities, and more specifically focuses on export memory. A framework of export memory is proposed, with key propositions concerning antecedents to quality export memory content and its performance outcomes. Conclusions are made and future research directions are indicated.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exporting is still one of the most popular modes through which companies become international (Yeoh, 2000). However, export marketing is beset with higher risks due to lack of knowledge and familiarity with the market abroad, the market's heterogeneity, sophistication, or turbulence (Leonidou and Adams-Florou, 1999). In order to overcome the uncertainties involved in exporting, export information acquisition is perceived as essential (Souchon and Diamantopoulos, 1999), and availability of relevant export information is seen as a basic determinant of export success (Denis and Depelteau, 1985). However, with information becoming more easily accessible to almost any organization at about the same time (Zaltman and Moorman, 1988), competitive advantage is to be gained from how information is treated once acquired, rather than from its mere acquisition (Hart and Diamantopoulos, 1993). First, from both experiential and objective information (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977), exporting organizations must *learn* at a rate that at least equals the rate of environmental change if they want to remain competitive in the international market (Mason, 1994, Stata, 1989). Second, given both the cost of collecting export information (Cavusgil, 1984) and the risks of information overload (Souchon and Diamantopolous, 1997), efficiencies in export decision-making are likely to be had from the development of an internal knowledge base or *export memory* (Rich, 1977), an important element of organizational learning (Sinkula, 1994).

Export memory can be defined as export information and knowledge (or encoded experience) historically acquired and stored for future use, that is concerned about and related to the export function, and which could be brought to bear on present export decisions (c.f., Walsh and Ungson, 1991; Berthon, Pitt, and Ewing, 2001). Export memory is a key facilitator of the decision making process (c.f., Day, 1994). To the authors' best knowledge, little attention has been paid, to date, to export memory and its performance ramifications.

The main objective of this paper is therefore to develop a conceptual framework of export memory, anchored in a cross-disciplinary review of the literature. First, a brief review of the literature on organizational memory is provided. Second, a conceptualisation of export memory is presented. Finally, managerial implications and future research avenues are put forward.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL AND EXPORT MEMORY

Organizational memory is the collective knowledge of an organization and contains policies, procedures (Day, 1994), theories in use, shared mental models, information databases, formalized procedures and routines, formal cultural mores that guide behavior (Slater and Narver, 1995).

Preservation of organizational memory becomes increasingly important to organizations as they recognize that experiential knowledge is a key to competitiveness (Stein and Zwass, 1995). "Organizations without practical mechanisms to 'remember' what worked and why have to repeat their failures and rediscover their success formulas over and over again" (Day, 1994, p.18). The role of organizational memory in the learning process is therefore critical in capturing,

conserving, and retrieving useful information. In turn, organizational memory contributes to the honing of core competencies, increased autonomy, and eventual lowering of transaction costs (Hedberg, 1981; Walsh and Ungson, 1991).

Retention of memory falls into two basic receptacles: people and documents (e.g., Cyert and March, 1963; Covington, 1981). People are involved in the cognitive and emotive part of storage that encompasses cognitive maps, shared understanding, norms, roles, routine patterns of behavior, schema, scripts, language, etc. The documented aspect covers standard operating procedures, files, databases, photographs, recordings, etc. These two divisions of knowledge storage are not mutually exclusive since knowledge kept by people in their cognitive power could also be documented. Likewise, it is possible that documented knowledge reside in people's memory. In an export context, it is unlikely that memory will be stored any differently, although the content (i.e., what is actually stored in the export function's memory bank) may well differ from the content of organizational memory. The content of memory can be likened to the type of information stored (Moorman and Miner, 1997). In this context, quality of information is increasingly recognized as the most valuable asset of the firm (Wang, Lee, Pipino, and Strong, 1998). As a result, quality of export memory content (QEMC) is likely to be a key factor in distinguishing export functions that learn well versus those that do not. Quality of memory content can be represented by the following dimensions: accuracy, objectivity, believability, relevance, value-added, timeliness, completeness, interpretability, ease of understanding, concise representation, and consistent representation of the material (or information) stored (Wang and Strong, 1996; Huang et al., 1999).

3. CONCEPTUALIZATION

The amount and extent of QEMC depends to a great degree on the organization's effort in generating the information. As in human and computer memories where inputs or stimuli must be received in order for memory to function (Klatzky, 1980), QEMC depends a lot on the information which is received by the organization. The inputs received by the members of the organization informs its memory. Besides passively acquiring information from external sources, organizations do also actively search for them. A proactive mode of acquiring information provides the organization with more chances of widening the scope and the depth of its knowledge about the export market. This acquired knowledge forms the content of its memory upon being retained in its repositories.

Furthermore, the acquisition of foreign market information has been widely recognized in the literature to play a vital role in the direction and scope of the internationalization process (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). The quantity and scope of export information which is important for an organization's international operation is determined by its acquisition of foreign market information. As mentioned earlier, this acquired information conditions the substance of its memory.

Exporting organizations have a wide range of information needs that would include the macroenvironment (physical, demographic, sociocultural, economic, political-legal, technological), microenvironment (company, suppliers, marketing intermediaries, competitors,

customers, publics), market characteristics (size/growth, structure, entry conditions, preferences, potential, position/share), marketing mix (product, pricing, distribution, logistics, promotion), and other miscellaneous items (Leonidou and Adams-Florou, 1999). Detailed or situation specific information has been found to be more useful for export development than simply general facts (Dennis and Depelteau, 1985). Organizations acquire information about their markets from sources outside of the firm (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). There are diverse alternative sources of information relevant to exporters as well as varied ways of acquiring foreign market information and assistance (Reid, 1984). Since detailed information is more useful to an exporting organization, it would need to seek information that would provide it with the necessary quantity and scope of information.

P1: The greater the export information generation, the greater the QEMC.

Organizational learning happens only when knowledge/information generated is distributed and shared by members of the organization (Huang, Lee, and Wang, 1999; Huber, 1991). As mentioned earlier, knowledge/information hoarded by one person does not become part of organizational learning and thus, of EM. Indeed, as explained by Stein (1989), before functional or organizational memory can be created, the memory of the individuals involved needs to precede it. The process by which the sum of individual memory is transferred into an organizational or functional memory involves information sharing among decision makers (e.g. Argyris and Schon, 1978; Levitt and March, 1988; Moorman and Miner, 1997; Sinkula, 1994; Traugott, 1978). Information that is not shared by individuals because of some reasons, e.g. for some political motives, cannot by definition be labeled functional or organizational memory. It is recognized that to the extent that the individual concerned is a staff member, and part of the organization (or function), his/her memory is also part of the organization's (or function's). However, should this individual leave for any reason (e.g. to join the competitor), the memory he/she has would be lost. It can therefore be considered too transient to be effectively part of organizational or functional memory.

The human side of EM involves people and their relations (Stein,1989). The Durkheim school of sociology has argued that the collective mind is composed of individual minds that share information through symbols (Traugott, 1978). This in effect advocates the idea that the collective memory is in fact the social process of information and knowledge distribution which leads to shared interpretation and stored as societal norms and customs (Stein, 1989). It is therefore necessary that information is shared and interpreted before it could become a part of the organization's EM. Sharing of information can take different modes. It could be done through oral interaction or through the sharing of knowledge in documented forms.

Procter, Souchon, and Cadogan (2000) identified the following eight dimensions to market information dissemination: number of internal sources providing information, regularity of dissemination, formalisation of dissemination, quantity of information disseminated, organization-wide dissemination, speed of dissemination, information summarisation, and information modification. The number of internal sources providing information, organization-wide dissemination, speed of dissemination, and information summarisation have been posited to have a positive effect on market information dissemination (MID). On the other hand, regularity

of dissemination, formalisation of dissemination, quantity of dissemination have been thought to have a quadratic (inverted u-shaped) relationship with the quality of MID process. Information modification is seen to have a negative relation with MID process. Since EM requires in principle the sharing of information, a high quality of information dissemination is seen to produce a richer EM. Dissemination allows the members of the organization to benefit from synergy through discussion and interpretation of the information shared towards a common understanding.

P2: The more knowledge/information is shared and interpreted within the organization, the higher will be the QEMC.

Organizations seeking to preserve lessons and knowledge gained from the past are challenged to create repositories containing EM. Following the above discussion on EM, organizations have two main repositories of export knowledge, the human mind (cognitive), and the all encompassing "cultural artifacts" including the use of technology.

Semantic or episodic knowledge/information gained is stored in the memory of individuals in the form of mental models or frameworks (Levitt and March, 1988). Individuals will keep factual information about the foreign market or lessons learned from previous experiences. The biological (mental) capacity of individuals to retain knowledge/information and their willingness to remember determine the amount of knowledge or information that they can absorb.

When people leave the organization, a part of EM is lost. In instances when organization restructures without personnel loss, a favorable or unfavorable consequences on EM may occur. As Stein (1989) has articulated, "When people depart, they leave spaces in existing networks of social interaction and take with them important knowledge and experience accumulated over many years. Individuals definitely can make a difference to organizational life." Clearly, the knowledge and experiences gained through the years are stored in individual members of the organization, a basic repository for EM.

The "cultural artifacts" encompass all the other means by which the organization endeavors to retain its knowledge/information gained. It includes among others the following specific receptacles: procedures, scripts, physical artifacts, behavioral routines, values, and norms (Day, 1994; Slater and Narver, 1995; Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Knowledge/information gained could be translated into a form of policies or standard operating procedures which could guide decision makers in future decisions. A major determinant of the capacity of cultural artifacts to retain knowledge/information is the attitudes of top management and export decision makers to adopt the knowledge/information gained into different cultural artifacts which could be of use to the export function. Lessons gained when translated into rules acquire the character of stored knowledge or EM. The value the organization places in storing knowledge/information is reflected in how individuals are rewarded when their knowledge/information is formalized.

To support human memory and cultural artifact, organizations can make use of information technology (IT). IT can preserve and retrieve EM , assist in intelligence analysis, and decision making as studied by several scholars (Day, 1994; Conklin, 1996; Stein and Zwass, 1995; Walsh

and Ungson, 1991). Establishing a mechanism to capture the experiences and knowledge held by present employees and incorporating them into an automated information system could prove to be invaluable to organizations (Croasdell, 2001). IT such as the Internet, local area networks, and distributed databases could be used to develop integrated learning. They facilitate the distribution, storage, and retrieval of information (Huber, 1991). Furthermore, EM supported by information technology provides several advantages because the contents that are stored are explicit, could promptly be modified when needed, easily retrieved when demanded, and conveniently shared as required.

IT facilitates the storing of information in a more orderly and convenient way. Storing information in digital form saves on space and ensures the longevity of the stored information. Furthermore, it also allows quick updates. Retrieving information becomes easy and its presentation more attractive and intuitive.

IT can provide support to export memory in various ways such as database, knowledgebase (Stein and Zwass, 1995), electronic meeting systems (Morrison, 1993; Nunamaker, Dennis and Valacich, 1991), hyper-text based systems (Conklin and Begelman, 1988) and object-oriented tools (Minch, 1990).

Like in the computer's memory where the amount of information stored depends on hardware capacity, EM depends a lot on the capacity of human and nonhuman receptacles to store knowledge.

P3: The higher the capacity of organizations to store knowledge gained, the higher will the QEMC.

Organizations which have a long experience in exporting would have more knowledge about the export market. Experience is one of the main ways in which organizations learn. The richer is its experience the more it is able to comprehend the export market. Experience is a function of the organization's time in the export operation. As Diamantopoulos and Cadogan (1996, p.37) found out, experienced exporters have the "ability to identify accurate and relevant information avoiding information overload by purifying, summarizing and filtering information during the dissemination process"

"Experienced exporters who have richer belief structures guiding the interpretation of information" (Diamantopoulos and Cadogan, 1996, p.41) will be able to understand better their environment and thereby increase their number of potential behaviors. The stored knowledge would enable to give them a better basis for analyzing and evaluating their present situation (Aguilar, 1967; Berthon, Pitt, and Ewing, 2001). With EM an organization is deemed to avoid the mistakes of the past and take advantage of its past successes. As George Santayana observed: "Those who can not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

P4: The more experience the organization in exporting the higher the QEMC.

Referring back to the proposed dimensions of QEMC, it follows that greater quality of memory content would result in greater usefulness of this memory bank; for example, relevance of export

information has been found to be a determinant of the actual use of this information (Reid, 1984). In turn, usefulness of export information increases the use of this information (Souchon and Diamantopoulos, 1996), and it can be inferred from this that usefulness of export memory content will increase the use of export memory. Secondly, QEMC also appears to presage ease of use of the export memory. For instance, a concise representation of the material contained within the memory bank will make the application of this content for decision-making purposes more efficient (see Procter et al., 2000). Lastly, benefits gained from past use of high quality export memory, will make it more probable that organizations would use them repeatedly in the future. As a result, it is proposed that:

P5: The higher the quality of export memory content, the greater the use of export memory.

Organizations with rich memory would be in a better position to assess problems under varied perspectives. They can readily apply lessons learned as well as comprehend, extrapolate, interpret, and apply new information in unique ways that those lacking that prior information cannot copy (Roberts, 1991). Moreover, stored knowledge allows also its applications to help analyze new problems and find innovative solutions by applying its general principles (Anderson, 1983). Strong familiarity with product and market allows export managers a more balanced or holistic understanding of marketing issues. Information from memory can suggest a particular course of action (Shane, 2000). It may strengthen argument for that action by providing evidence of causality or correlation, provide unequivocal evidence to support goals of managers and the way of attaining them, and may also allow decision makers to consider the impact of the decision to the whole system (Churhman, 1981). By reducing search and focusing attention, routines and standard approaches help improve the firms financial performance (Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Furthermore, shared information and experiences also speed up and improve coherent action (Dougherty, 1992), an important requirement in achieving export success where quick decisions are normally made.

Stored information could lead organizations to think in an asymmetrical way. Kyriakopoulos and de Ruyter (2002) posited that a more conscious and deliberate retrieval of declarative knowledge increases the chances of using prior knowledge in a less standard fashion. They backed up their statement with the research of Argyris and Schon (1978) on organizational learning that suggests that organizational change requires conscious understanding of their activities and reasoned analysis (a declarative stock) of why they need to change.

Specific to export marketing, the classical theory on internationalization process espoused by Johanson and Valhne (1977) supports the idea that organization tends to expand its export operation based on its past experience and familiarity with the foreign market which is a stocked knowledge. If memory has high level of quality, it becomes a source of competitive advantage, in so far as that specific resource which is called quality memory enables the creation of value and also resists the duplicative efforts of competitors (Barney, 1991). With memory's nature of being both tacit and explicit, it would be more difficult for other organizations to copy this specific corporate resource. Following classical decision making theory and applying it to export marketing decision, memory influences the choice of criteria and the importance attached to them (Robertson and Wood, 2001). Experience, for example, would indicate what factors are crucial

indicators of a wise market choice. It will also give clues to the dependability of potential export clients based on their past performance, thus, eliminating those delinquent importers. Furthermore, prior experience with a particular exchange partner may reduce transaction cost (Gulati, 1995). In addition, investment in export relationships (a form of prior experience) of significant size allows organizations to realize economies of scale (Verwaal and Donkers, 2002). Supporting Johanson and Valne's (1977) incremental approach to internationalization, Yli-Renko, Autio, and Tontti (2002) and Chetty and Erikson (2002) demonstrated the crucial importance of a firm's experiential knowledge to its subsequent actions in the foreign market.

Prior knowledge plays a critical role in discovery. In particular, three major dimensions of prior knowledge are important in entrepreneurial discovery: individual's prior knowledge of markets, knowledge of ways of serving the markets, and knowledge of customer problems that enable entrepreneurs to see opportunities Individuals unfamiliar with customers' problems will find it difficult to recognize possible solutions. The discovery process can be triggered by knowledge already possessed rather than by a search for knowledge needed (Shane, 2000). In the area of product development for example, Hargadon and Sutton (1997) observed that product designers use analogy between past solutions and current problems to come out with solutions that make use of the strengths of past solutions and ignore those aspects which are not applicable. Accumulated knowledge makes it possible for firms to discover productive opportunities in its environment (Liebeskind, 1996). Likewise, opportunity discernment in the export market is also supported by familiarity with the market (Autio, Almeida, and Sapiensa, 2000; Barkema, Bell and Pennings, 1996; Eriksson, Johanso, Majkgard and Sharma, 1997; Gatignon and Andernson, 1988; Johanson and Valhlne, 1977; Madhok, 1997). A deeper understanding of their present situation as regard to the export market, achieved through a profound knowledge of its history, enables organizations to judiciously assess its prospects in the market and articulate its future directions (Andersen, 1993; Autio, Sapeinza, and Almeida, 2000; Hadjikhani, 1997; Oviatt and McDougall, 1997). Furthermore, knowledge of the past also allows the organization to ask the right questions and source answers from strategic suppliers of information. It has been shown by Cadogan, Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, (2002) that experience and existing knowledge influence the exporting organization's ability to locate better sources of information crucial to the organization's performance. Readily available information speeds up the decision making process. It provides the organization the ability to seize opportunities when they appear more quickly than competitors, specially in export marketing where speed of response is of the essence. Thus, it is put forward that:

P6: The greater the use of export memory, the greater the export performance of the organization.

Increasing environmental turbulence as characterized by some industries has led practitioners and researchers to focus on how an ever changing environment influences a firm's operations (Cadogan, Paul, Salminen, Puumalianen, and Sundqvist, 2001; Glazer and Weiss, 1993; Gray, Greenley, Matear, and Matheson, 1999; March, 1991; Moorman and Miner, 1997). A turbulent environment displays a dramatic increase in the number of events occurring within a given period. These environments are information intensive (Glazer, 1991) exhibiting frequent

turnovers in the general stock of knowledge possessed by market participants. Thus, the time-value of information becomes the most significant factor in managerial decision-making.

Market dynamism has challenged the previous concepts of the marketplace which managers have used in the past (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997, 1998; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; D'Veni 1994, 1995). There are industries that not only change dramatically but also continuously. Rapid and continuous changes could be seen in the environment such as technology, regulations, entry and exit of competitors, and consumer demand. When the environment is hypercompetitive, specific sources of competitive advantage could not be maintained for a long time since it could easily be destroyed by competition (Bogner and Barr, 2000).

Managers in turbulent and hypercompetitive environments tend to seek real-time information (Eisenhardt, 1989) derived from informal, personal, and face-to-face sources (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Daft, Sormunen, and Parks, 1988). They seek such information because the information gathered is richer, includes more cues, and results in faster feedback (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Daft, Sormunen, and Parks, 1988). Thus frameworks are updated more quickly (Bogner and Barr, 2000). Historical knowledge of customers' likes, competitors' strengths and weaknesses, and industry structure would be unhelpful during this time of turbulence. Usually, this information is time sensitive (for example, the price of a product) since it loses value in subsequent periods (e.g., as a result of frequent inter-period price changes (Glazer and Weiss, 1993).

The automatic use of routines and processes may be an obstacle to creative thinking (Sinkula 1994). Organizations with proven routines and policies tend to have limited information search (Kyriakos and de Ruyter, 2002; Weiss and Heide, 1993). Furthermore, although organizations may search for information, the routines themselves act as perceptual filters (Hedberg 1981) and make the organizations unable to notice new alternative strategic actions (Day 1994). What has worked in the past for the organization becomes easily institutionalized. They may worked well for the organization but they could also be the cause of its woes.Moorman and Miner (1997) observed that under conditions of high environmental turbulence, high memory dispersion has a negative impact on creativity. Other studies (Miner, 1990; Tushman and Anderson, 1986) support the liability of a strong memory in times of fast-changing environments. Organizations successful in the past may fall into a *competency trap* (Levitt and March, 1988; March, 1991) or a *core rigidity* (Leonard-Barton, 1992). This is where decision makers cannot see beyond the box or may be inhibited to how things are done (Ghemawat, 1991; McDonough, 1993). In such cases, export memory may reinforce a single-loop learning style when in fact a double-loop learning style is needed **(Argyris and Schon, 1978.)** Furthermore, prior work argues that behavior, such as formal planning in high-turbulence markets, is suboptimal because it slows down processes and interferes with environmental requirement for faster, "real-time" decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Knowledge per se would not always be unconditionally positive on organizational performance. Needless to say, the accuracy, relevance, validity, and reliability of what is stored in export memory have enormous repercussions on marketing managers' decisions **(Lehner and Maier, 2000)**. Export memory, as a time function, may easily lose its value when market changes rapidly

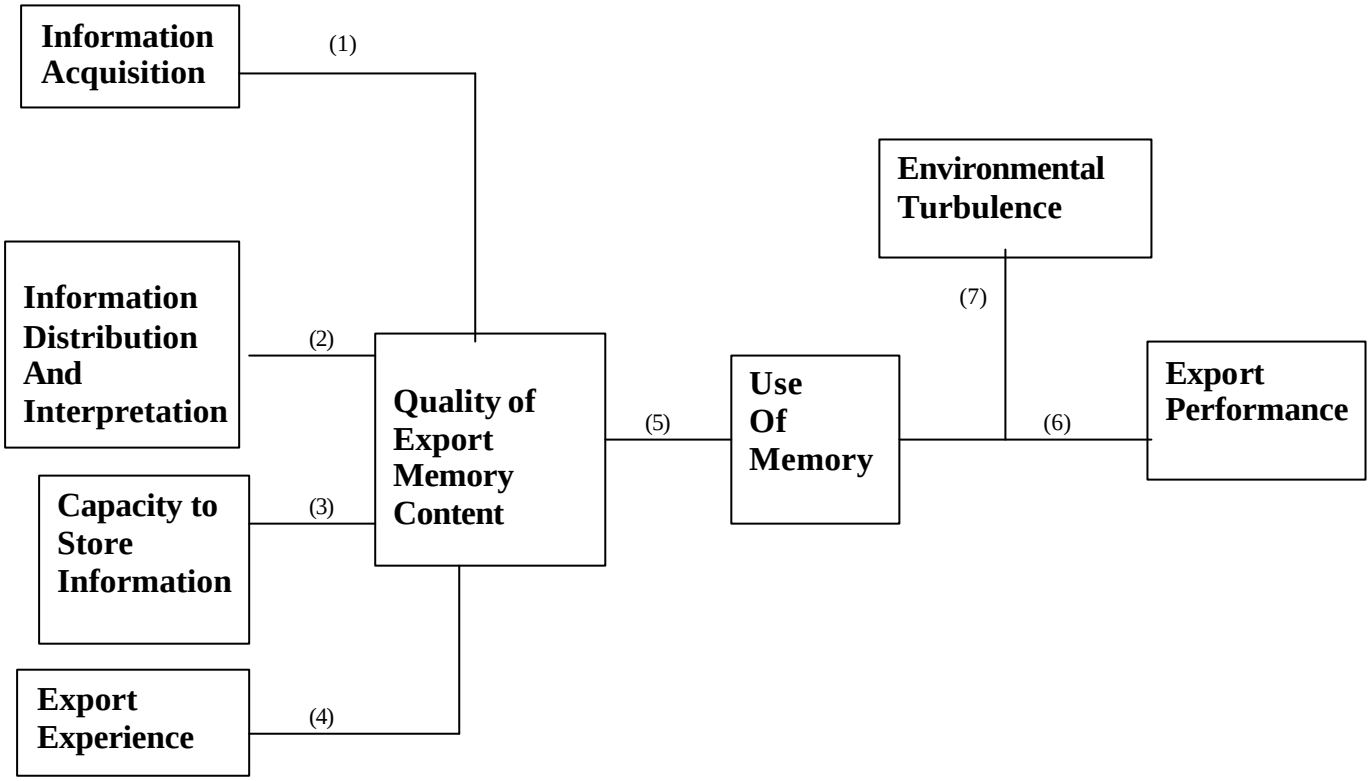
and dramatically **(Glazer, 1991)**. Decision makers who use export memory with low quality content may find themselves more confused when facing a turbulent market. An irrelevant export memory only gives the organization the wrong cues **(Moorman and Miner, 1997).** What works in the past does not guarantee that it will continue to work well in the future. A poor export memory could only drive an organization towards the wrong direction **(Davenport and Prusak, 1997). It is widely accepted that high-quality information benefits firms while poor quality information hurts firms (Strong et al., 1997)** It is precisely in times of high environmental turbulence when the usefulness of a high quality export memory becomes more apparent. A changing environment normally requires new ways of thinking **(Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984)** as well as quick decisions. A constantly updated export memory could give proper indications to the organizations as well as assist it in making quick decisions. It helps provide clarity to a situation depicted by chaotic changes. Following that line it is therefore posited that:

P7: Under conditions of high environmental turbulence, the use of export memory will be positively related to export performance, if the quality of the memory content is high.

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH AREA

Export marketing organizations need to become learning organizations if they want to succeed in a more competitive and global business environment **(Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Farrell, 2000)**. Export memory, as part of the organizational learning process, plays an important role in the decision-making process of an export marketing organization **(Noonan, 1999**). This paper expounded on the concept of the quality of the export memory content and its effects on memory use and export performance.

This paper has started a more in-depth enquiry into the nature and role of EM. What should immediately follow is the empirical testing of the hypotheses which have been put forward. **Since the constructs of environmental turbulence and export performance have existing operational measures (eg. Cadogan, 1997; Glazer and Weiss, 1993; Greenley 1995; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Slater and Narver, 1994), survey research could proceed rapidly once appropriate measures for quality of export memory content and use of memory are established**. A further research on the different dimensions of export memory deserves the attention of scholars. Furthermore, an investigation on the antecedents of quality export memory content is an urgent task. A few more questions would need some well founded answers. What aspect of export memory are actually used by export marketing managers in making decision? What kind of information are normally stored by export marketing organizations? How effective is the organization in being discriminate in storing knowledge? Is it possible that organizations may suffer memory overload or could they be accumulating information which have no intrinsic value for the organization? What other roles does EM play in export marketing?



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