DISSERTATION

An Investigation into the Impact of Knowledge Management in Improving Organisational Effectiveness and Generating Sustained Competitive Advantage

MBA Executive Leadership

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Background for the Research</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Research Objectives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Research Question</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Research Process</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Recipients for the Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Structure of the Dissertation</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Knowledge Management</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Organisational Effectiveness</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Competitive Advantage</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Organisational Structure</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Organisational Culture</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIG.</td>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1</td>
<td>Hypothesised model Zheng, Yang, &amp; McLean (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2</td>
<td>The SECI Model of Knowledge Generation (Nonaka &amp; Takeuchi, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3</td>
<td>The Cultural Web of an Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4</td>
<td>Transactional and Transformational Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 5</td>
<td>Linking CEO Values to Organisational Culture and Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 6</td>
<td>Research ‘Onion’ Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 7</td>
<td>Contextual knowledge elicitation for inductive approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 8</td>
<td>Adaption of Zheng et al model 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 9</td>
<td>Adaption of Zheng et al model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig.10</td>
<td>Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DECLARATION

I declare that all the work contained in this dissertation is entirely my own, except where appropriately referenced to the originating source, and referenced in the Bibliography section.

No part of this work has previously been submitted in support of any application for an academic qualification at Dublin Business School or any other academic institution.

Signed: ..............................................

Bernard Finn

Date ..................................................

15\textsuperscript{th} August 2013
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ABSTRACT

This research investigates by means of a qualitative research process, that the link between knowledge management and organisational effectiveness can generate a real competitive advantage in the modern business world. Much empirical research exists in the distinct areas of Knowledge Management (KM), Organisational Effectiveness (OE), and Competitive Advantage (CA). A review of the appropriate literature, however, would suggest that there appears to be limited research carried out on how these three distinct subjects fit interlink within an organisational context, and what intrinsic link exists between them.

The conducted research examines the management areas of a hypothesised model developed by Zheng, Yang, and McLean (2010) and then, in order to consider and question how these distinct areas are intrinsically linked, the study develops an adaption and extension of the Zheng et al model illustrating the progression through to generating sustained competitive advantage, and built upon the dominant emergent themes.

Results and findings are by means of a qualitative research process rooted in inductive grounded theory whereby emergent themes are analysed within the context of the research objective and discussed in terms of their veracity and relevance.

Much of the research in this area existing in the literature is of a quantitative nature and the purpose of this study is to investigate the emergent qualitative findings as a framework for future research by either quantitative or qualitative methods, or a pluralistic combination of both.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

“As Ireland moves further into the knowledge economy, how organisations effectively manage knowledge will be of great importance in developing a competitive advantage”

(Gallagher, 2011)

The above quotation summarises the premise that this dissertation endeavours to explore. In order to be able to compete commercially in its specific marketplace, particularly in a recessionary period such as that which is currently prevalent, it is essential for organisations to maximise the potential of its internal strengths, competences and knowledge in order to increase organisational effectiveness. The ultimate aim of any commercial organisation is to maintain or increase its profitability, and to maximise the wealth of its shareholders. In order to deliver targets, and to achieve the aims and goals set out in an organisation’s mission statement and corporate strategy, it must strive, through overall effectiveness to generate competitive advantage over rivals.

Limited research has been conducted that can provide real insights for organisations wishing to gain a competitive advantage through people’s personal knowledge (Iqbal et al, 2010), but greater empirical research indicates that dedicated knowledge sharing and management can have a significant positive impact on organisational effectiveness, thus ultimately leading to competitive advantage.

The rationale behind this dissertation is to further investigate, by means of a qualitative research process, that the link between knowledge management and organisational effectiveness can generate a real competitive advantage in the modern business world.
1.2 Background for the Research

From a personal perspective the rationale and motivation for choosing this topic as a study area to be developed into a full MBA Dissertation is a genuine interest in the topic emanating from 20 years working experience in continuously evolving organisations. With a background in Project and Operations Management, as opposed to Human Resource and Strategic Management where the concept of ‘knowledge management’ and ‘organisational effectiveness’ would typically sit in an organisational structure, I am engaged and challenged by the task of researching and learning more about the subject area. I am of the view that any organisation would benefit from a better understanding of the concept, and whilst most organisations would employ a Knowledge Management system to some degree, for many, including organisations with whom I have been employed, it is a function that operates almost unwittingly, with little or no formal structure. I am also interested in the potential that a deeper insight into, and understanding of, the topic may present for me in the way of future career opportunities, in either the business or academic sectors, or both.

1.3 Research Objectives

Research is, above all, a process of discovery (Collis and Hussey, 2009), and it is not possible to contain all the developments that will take place, nor produce conclusive answers to the research topic. The objective of this research is to investigate the topic within the context of contemporary business organisations, and on rigorous analysis of the results of the qualitative research, discuss the principal emergent themes that emanate from a grounded theory approach. This dissertation is investigating a business issue and unity within the research process comes about, according to Brannick, (Brannick & Roche,1997), because all business
research is a way of representing business life related activities, and all researchers engage in a dialogue of ideas (theory) and evidence (data) when they construct representations of business activities.

According to Rowley (2004), there are four essential considerations for good research: adding to existing knowledge, a clear purpose or research question; objectivity and reliability; and, access, ethics and politics. The approach this dissertation follows is underpinned by a consistent recognition of these considerations.

Much empirical research exists in the distinct areas of Knowledge Management (KM), Organisational Effectiveness (OE), and Competitive Advantage (CA). According to Davenport and Prusak (2000), more and more, business leaders and consultants talk about knowledge as the chief asset of organisations and the key to a sustainable competitive advantage. Allee (1997,p.30) supports this view, asserting that knowledge, as expertise and know-how is input into a product or service at every link of the value chain. A review of the appropriate literature, however, would suggest that there appears to be limited research carried out on how these three distinct subjects fit together in an organisational context. The purpose of the research study undertaken in order to complete this dissertation is, firstly, to investigate the central tenets of a hypothesised model developed by Zheng, Yang, and McLean (2010) (Figure 1), and then, in order to consider and question how these distinct areas are intrinsically linked within an organisational structure, the intention is to develop an adaption and extension of the Zheng et al model, based on the results and findings of the qualitative research process.
In order to develop the question proposed in this research study, it is beneficial to analyse and conceptualize the individual elements of the model illustrated in Fig. 1. This model, adapted from Zheng et al (2010) provides a framework upon which to conduct this research and to maintain focus on the principal elements. An expansion of this model to demonstrate the progression link to Competitive Advantage, and to integrate the emergent themes, will complete the hypothesis, and is illustrated in the Findings and Discussion chapter.

This dissertation will focus on these distinct areas of organisational strategy, it will investigate the inter-relationship between these areas, and will endeavour to demonstrate how improved management or increased focus on these areas are crucial to enhanced corporate performance and success. The ultimate objective is to examine the theory that by implementing improved and dedicated management of this integrated concept, real value can be added to the organisational performance.
It is not organisation-specific, industry-specific or sector-specific, but an empirical study and insight into how contemporary business leaders, across the spectrum, view the connotation of the research question.

### 1.4 Research Question

Collis & Hussey (2009,p117) define a “research question” as a specific question the research is designed to investigate and attempt to answer. This is the basis upon which this dissertation is intended. It is a question that is intended to gather information by an inductive approach as part of a qualitative research method. It is therefore more investigative than searching for a definitive answer. Blumberg et al (2005, p.61) describe investigative questions as questions the researcher must answer to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, by taking a general research question and breaking it into more specific questions about which to gather data or information.

The research question posed in this study is, I believe, of significant importance and relevance to present day business leaders, developing the statement attributed to Gallagher at the beginning of this study, and backed up by the research findings. Many business leaders are conscious of the need and benefits of dedicated knowledge management, can see how it can potentially improve organisational effectiveness and generate competitive advantage, but, for various reasons that will emerge, are unsure of how their organisations do actually systematically utilise their inherent knowledge to best advantage. The investigative nature of this study endeavours to examine the reasons behind this.
1.5 Research Process

Gill & Johnson (2002) cite Bechhofer (1974) in stating “the research process is not a clear-cut sequence of procedures following a neat pattern but a messy interaction between the conceptual and empirical world, deduction and induction occurring at the same time”. This description of the research process was not obvious to me at the outset, but it certainly became evident and understandable as the work progressed, as will be ruminated upon in the Self-Reflection section of this dissertation.

1.6 Recipients for Research

The primary recipient of this research will be the researcher as I will undoubtedly gain a far greater insight and depth of knowledge on the subject area following the extensive research process. Secondary recipients may include the researcher’s current, or any future, employer whom may also benefit from the acquired knowledge of the researcher. Any of the qualitative research participants who wish to avail of the completed study may also, subject to ethical codes of practice and confidentiality be recipients. Dublin Business School, both academic staff and students, and my dissertation supervisor (Ms. Joyce Byrne Walsh) may also be recipients of this research.

Finally, it is hoped that this dissertation will provide an academic foundation and framework upon which future research on this area can be developed.
1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured in a logical sequence in order to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the objectives, purpose and findings of the research study. Chapter 1 - Introduction, outlines the background and foundations to the study and sets out the logic and purpose of the research objectives and research question. Chapter 2 - Literature Review, examines the existing appropriate literature relevant to the study as a whole, and the individual elements of the research topic. It is divided into a number of sub-sections that focus on the individual elements and the interrelationship between them. It reviews and respects the literature in the context and application of Zheng et al’s (2010) hypothesised model, and of the themes that emerge from the qualitative interviews. Chapter 3 – Research Methodology sets out the methodology and techniques employed in conducting the research, together with commentary and justification on why such methods and techniques were used, including data collection, analysis and coding. This chapter also looks at ethical and procedural considerations that were taken into account, and gives a brief background on the research participants and their contribution to the study. Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussion discusses and analyses the themes, concepts, theories and interpretations to emanate from the research process. It looks at the conceptualisation and contextualisation of the results and endeavours to link emergent themes back to the literature, and summarises the evaluation of the research findings within the context of the research objective. Chapter 5 - Conclusion completes the extension of the Zheng et al model and synopsises the outcomes of the research. Finally, in Chapter 6 – Self-Reflection, a critical introspection is carried out, where the learning style and learning experience of the researcher is expressed in a personal narrative, reflecting on the various stages of conducting and compiling the research, the methods, tools and techniques employed, and the challenges, impediments, insights and sensitivities encountered throughout the process.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter endeavours to cogitate on the principal concepts of the research objective by examining and reviewing existing literature in the context of research topic. It will then expand to review relevant literature on principal themes emerging from the qualitative, grounded theory research method. Easterby-Smith et al, (2008) expound that literature reviews undertaken as part of a thesis invariably focus on the topics that relate to the main research questions that have been raised and highlight the influential conceptual or empirical studies that have been conducted in the field. The term literature review actually refers to a variety of different forms of commentary on existing knowledge. In its raw form literature is any source of recognized information. At the core of any literature review are works that appear as books or journal articles which represent the systematic communication of scholarly knowledge (Gabbott, 2004) while Fink (2005, p3) defines a research literature review as a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners and it upon this basis that the literature review is focussed and conducted.
2.2 Knowledge Management

“If only HP knew what HP knows, it could be so much more productive”…..Lew Platt, former CEO of Hewlett Packard.

Literature review supports that much has been written on the subject of KM and how it emerged from the world of academia to become a significant issue for business leaders from the 1990’s onwards. It is interesting to note from research carried out by Carrillo and Chinowsky (2006) that by the mid 2000’s several leading UK construction firms had appointed dedicated knowledge managers to oversee the function. Davenport and Prusak (1998) and Coleman (1999) have promoted KM as a practice with implications beyond that of simply developing information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures, with information sharing and retrieval potential. For example, according to Nunes et al (2005), the expectations are mostly of organisational gains in terms of:- growth and innovation in organisations; productivity and efficiency (reflected in absolute cost savings); customer relationships; employee learning, satisfaction and retention; and management decision-making.

It is now said that value added in most businesses today is in the form of knowledge, not “stuff”, according to Chinying Lang (2001). The significance of knowledge in the organization may have gained higher written prominence in recent times but its importance has been recognized throughout history (Ndinguri et al, 2012). The concept of Knowledge Management (KM) was first pioneered by Peter Drucker in the 1950’s, and extensive research has been conducted on the topic in the intervening years. According to Peter Drucker (1999), land, labour and capital - the classical factors of production - have become secondary to knowledge as the primary resource for the new economy. Knowledge management in
business organisations is a relatively recent concept, emerging from, according to Fong and 
Kwok (2009), the world of academia in the 1990’s to become a hot issue for business leaders. 
(Drucker,1999). Prusak & Matson (2006, p40) expand on this stating that “knowledge has 
always been an important driver of competitive advantage but changes in the economy have 
made it increasingly so. As it becomes harder to obtain privileged access to land, labour and 
capital, a firm’s proprietary knowledge remains difficult for other firms to replicate”. 
Chinying Lang (2001) acknowledges that we are in the midst of an economic transition from 
an era of competitive advantage based on information to a new era based on knowledge 
creation. On a fundamental basis KM typically is the process of creating value from an 
organisation’s intangible assets (Liebowitz, 2006), (Prusak & Matson, 2006) and is founded 
on core competences and capabilities developed by both individuals and the organisation over 
time. Tsoukas & Vladimirou (2001) consider that on the one hand individuals appropriate 
knowledge and expand their knowledge repertoires, and, on the other hand, how knowledge 
in organised contexts, becomes organisational. Because of radical, discontinuous change in 
the new business environment, organizations need faster and faster cycles of knowledge 
creation and action.(Malhotra, 1998). The global economy has meant organisations need to 
utilise their knowledge management systems more effectively (Conner and Prahalad, 1996; 
Spender, 1996; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Eisenhardt and Santos, 2002), and that those 
who possess the mechanisms to access this source of information will be able to capitalise on 
its application.

Harrison & Kessels (2003) assert that the creation of new knowledge depends on existing 
organisational structure and capabilities. Organisational Knowledge is much talked about but 
little understood (Tsoukas, H, & Vladimirou, 2001). It is the knowledge, values, 
understanding and experience that has been built up throughout an organisation over a period 
of time (Gallagher, 2011), and the capability members of an organisation have developed to
draw distinctions in the process of carrying out their work (Tsoukas, H, & Vladimirou, 2001). Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories, but also in in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms. (Davenport & Prusak, 2004, p.5). McKenzie & Van Winkelen (2004) emphasise the importance of knowledge as a critical resource for organisations to draw upon, and along with, Jackson et al (2003), Barney & Hesterley (2005), Zheng et al (2010), Iqbal et al (2010), Salleh and Ching (2011), and Tsai et al (2012) they further explore the link between KM and CA.

Resources-based view (RBV) highlighted the added value of human capital in organisation strategic management literature by defining and linking concepts such as knowledge (Ndinguri et al, 2012; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Grant, 1996), organisational learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Fisher & White, 2000), and organisational leadership (Norburn & Birley, 1988).

The ability to create and use knowledge enables the company to develop sustainable competitive advantages (Bamey, 1991; Grant, 1996; Zack, 1999; Hunt & Arnett, 2006). Knowledge creation process allows firms to amplify knowledge embedded internally and transfer knowledge into operational activities to improve efficiency and create business value (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka, Toyama & Nagata, 2000).

“Given the distributed character of organisational knowledge, the key to achieving coordinated action does not so much depend on those ‘higher up’ collecting more and more knowledge, as on those ‘lower down’ finding more and more ways of getting connected and interrelating the knowledge each one has”(Tsoukas, 2005, cited by Lambe 2007). Knowledge is only useful for those who can effectively learn, and learning is only effective if useful
knowledge is available (Strong, Davenport & Prusak, 2008). Knowledge management is an umbrella term which refers to any deliberate efforts to manage the knowledge of an organisation’s workforce, which can be achieved via a wide range of methods including directly, through the use of particular types of ICT, or more indirectly through the management of social processes, the structuring of organizations in particular ways or via the use of particular culture and people management practices (Hislop, 2009, p59).

Past research has documented that all knowledge has both explicit and tacit dimensions (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Hansen, 1999; Youngjin et al 2007), and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) differentiate between ‘explicit’ knowledge, i.e. that which can be documented and stored on paper or electronically, and ‘tacit’ knowledge, i.e. that which is stored in people’s heads. It is the view of Haas & Hansen (2007) that existing research has only partially investigated how different types of knowledge sharing may affect task performance differently. Hansen et al. (1999, p. 109) argue that KM can be seen as following two primary strategies; codification and personalisation. Codification involves the collection, coding and storage of data, information and knowledge that is accessible by others with appropriate access rights, and expanding on Nonaka’s theory, argues that explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be codified, such as simple software codes and market data. Personalisation provides for information sharing by osmosis within the organisation; there are few formalised knowledge transfer processes in place and knowledge is personally passed between individuals. When a company’s employees rely on explicit knowledge to do their work a people-to-document approach is adopted. Tacit knowledge, by contrast is difficult to articulate in writing and is acquired by personal experience. It includes scientific expertise, operational know-how, insights about an industry and business judgement. When people use tacit knowledge most often to solve problems, the person-to-person approach works best (Hansen et al, 1999). Tacit knowledge is believed to be one factor that distinguishes
successful managers from others (Armstrong & Mahmud, 2008), and the origin of the construct of tacit knowledge is often attributed to the science philosopher, Michael Polanyi, who described it in his famous quote, “we can know more than we can tell” (1966, p. 4).

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argue that effective organizational knowledge creation best occurs through the spiral process where knowledge is converted from tacit to explicit in a continuous and dynamic cycle, as illustrated in Figure 2, The SECI Model.

**Fig. 2 - The SECI Model of Knowledge Generation**
It is when tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge interact that innovation occurs. Knowledge creation is facilitated by deliberately managing the cycle, and occurs probably unwittingly in most organisations. Organizational knowledge creation begins with socialization, where individuals share experience and mental knowledge. It develops into externalization, when individuals use metaphors or analogies to articulate hidden tacit knowledge that is otherwise difficult to communicate. It moves into the combination phase for knowledge to be articulated, shared and expounded. Finally, individuals learn by doing and internalizing the new knowledge. The spiral begins again as the experience-based operational knowledge learned in the first cycle provides a larger knowledge base for continuous innovation and growth. It is this model that demonstrates how knowledge is generated and recycled. Moreover, according to Nonaka, Toyama and Konno (2000), knowledge creation organisations create their knowledge through interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge. This process of knowledge conversion enables explicit and tacit knowledge to grow in both quantity and quality (Esterhuizen et al, 2011).

Nonaka (1994) argues that the generation and accumulation of tacit knowledge is determined by the “variety” of an individual’s experiences and the individual’s commitment and involvement in the “context” of the situation. This knowledge, unsupported by direct instruction, may well lead to a performance advantage for the individual because “it is likely that some individuals will fail to acquire it” (Sternberg et al., 2000).

The literature extensively refers to the general tendency in human beings being resistant to sharing the knowledge they possess (Nandita, 2013), while, Szulanski (1996) found that various organisational and individual factors also contribute to what he called ‘‘knowledge
stickiness”, that is the slowing down of easy and effective knowledge transfer and further asserted that ‘knowledge stickiness’ can be mitigated by providing supportive learning environments. Nonaka & Nishiguchi,(2001) believe that knowledge development, especially social knowledge development of organisations, cannot be taken for granted since knowledge is very fragile in them and since individual knowledge can be easily killed, organisational knowledge development as social activity can be quite difficult or, in the worst case, impossible”.

Sven Carlsson (cited by Mylonopoulos & Tsoukas, 2003) develops a theoretical argument concerning the role of information technologies in supporting inter-organizational knowledge management. He establishes the criticality of knowledge in inter-organizational networks and, by drawing on the resource-based view of the firm, emphasizes the role of such inter-organizational knowledge in competitive strategy and comparative advantage.
2.3 Organisational Effectiveness

Robertson et al (2002) describe OE as “a complex multi-dimensional construct…. …organisations will differ in their overall concept of ‘effectiveness’”. According to Oghojafor et al,(2012) organisational effectiveness is a complex and contentious concept. No two authorities agree on what constitutes effectiveness or on how it is measured although they all agree that it involves attention to goals, satisfaction of constituents and relationship with the external environment. Lambe (2007, p 49,50) defines organisational effectiveness as a combination of: the ability to set collective, realistic, and achievable goals; the ability to make detailed plans, organise and manage resources and coordinate actions in pursuit of those goals; a degree of consistency in the extent to which goals are achieved; the ability to make appropriate changes to plans and actions in the light of changes in the environment; and the ability to identify and respond appropriately to opportunities and risks in the environment.

The Zheng et al (2010) model is derived from Zheng et al’s research paper on Organisational Effectiveness. It clearly defines key contributing factors as illustrated and provides the basic framework upon which this thesis is founded. However research conducted as part of this study would suggest the Zheng model, whilst encapsulating the primary enablers, does not conclusively trace the progression from the enablers through KM to OE.

Drucker (2007) refers to ‘The Spirit of an Organisation’ where he likens it to energy - “good spirit in an organisation means that the energy turned out is larger than the sum of the efforts put in”, whilst Buckman (2004), discusses the collective effectiveness of groups over the vulnerability of individuals in a competitive situation or market, and Liebowitz (2006),
further categorizes the concept into internal and external organisational effectiveness where both the internal and external environments are considered separately.

Kirby (2005) considers the theory of high performing organisations, building primarily on the previous research of Peters and Waterman (1982). This research uncovered senior managers’ perspectives on what makes an organisation effective, or high performing. It captured many of the contributing factors already mentioned in this thesis. Kirby (2005) concluded that considering all the research carried out in the interim, it seems as though we have reached a critical point in the evolution of a theory of high performance - the point where management researchers have begun to build effectively on one another's work. But it remains inconclusive and is likely always to, as the parameters and key indicators for ultimate organisational effectiveness will continue to change and evolve in parallel with changes to industries and advancements in technologies.

However, in the context of this study Baron & Armstrong (2007) assert that organisational effectiveness also depends upon making good use of its knowledge, which needs to be developed, captured, and exchanged in order to create organisational capital, which, according to Salleh & Ching Choo,(2011) includes a combination of a company’s human, organisational, and knowledge resources, which in turn are significant resources to achieving competitive advantage.

As the pivotal factor that enables Knowledge Management to generate Competitive Advantage, Organisational Effectiveness is a vital link in the chain, yet the most difficult to conceptualise. There is no definitive consensus as to what makes organisations ‘effective’, and while the literature reveals many interesting theories and postulations such as (Burke and Cooper 2008),- performance management; (Oghojafor et al 2011), - diverse organisation specific metrics; (Lambe, 2007),- knowledge taxonomies; and (Kamaluddin and
Rahman, 2010) – organisational culture and intellectual capital, it is the view of Cameron & Whetton (1981) that the chaotic nature of the theoretical literature on organisational effectiveness stems from the authors’ arguments over which of the competing definitions and models of effectiveness should be universally adopted.

In terms of overall organisational effectiveness, Hamlin et al (2001) assert that for every organisational change, either ‘new’ knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits (KASH) have to be acquired, or alternatively, ‘existing’ knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits must be redistributed. Unless the KASH gaps flowing inevitably from organisational change initiatives are bridged effectively, whether at organisational, group, or individual level, the organisation will not develop the critical capabilities required to make a successful transition from the present state to the new desired state (Hamlin et al, 2001). This assertion, and the importance of the individual elements of KASH, feed directly into this research study.

The concept of organisational effectiveness is central to the investigation of organisational structures, processes and outcomes (Cameron & Whetten, 1981) who goes on to state that among the problems in the literature on organisational effectiveness are the over-reliance on researcher imposed criteria of effectiveness and the tendency to measure perceptions of effectiveness at only one point in time.

“KM practices need to fit with organisational context in order to create a competitive edge” (Davenport and Prusak, 2000) and it is within this context that this research study investigates.
2.4 Competitive Advantage

Competitive Advantage is a widely used term in the modern business world, the concept being pioneered by Michael Porter in his seminal publication in 1985.

There are numerous, but all very similar, definitions of Competitive Advantage,- i.e. the `edge’ that an organisation has over its rivals. Lynch (2005) simplifies it as the significant advantages that an organisation has over its competitors that allow the organisation to add more value, or be more profitable, than its competitors in the same market. Competitive advantage in Porter’s perspective (Singh, 2012) is being able to increase earnings despite the competitive pressures. According to Barney & Hesterley (2006), a firm has a competitive advantage when it is capable of creating more economic value than rival firms. Grant (2010) however argues that if competitive advantage is identified solely with superior profitability, then “why do we need the concept of competitive advantage at all?” The reality is that competitive advantage can be measured in a number of different ways and by factoring in key performance indicators that may be of utmost importance to different organisations.

Competitive strategy must drive knowledge strategy (Hansen et al, 1999).

Agha et al (2012) postulate that in a “highly competitive market core competence has emerged as a central concept for competitive strategy”. Irrespective of sector, industry or economic climate, the majority of progressive and successful organisations invest significant time, money and resources to developing and improving core competences, and many look to knowledge to as a critical competence and key driver (Salas & Von Glinow 2008 ; Crossan et al, 1999), on the basis that knowledge, when integrated effectively with inherent intellectual and organisational capital is a significant generator of competitive advantage. The most significant benefit that is usually associated with innovation and with facilitating knowledge acquisition, knowledge assimilation, knowledge transformation and knowledge exploitation
is usually that it creates a competitive advantage for the organisation (Cohen & Levinthal 1990). Tullio (2011) asserted that the role of knowledge in an organisation is crucial and that the organisation is conceptualised as an institution due to its nature of knowledge absorption and knowledge integration (Grant 1996). Therefore, the broader the scope of knowledge integration, the more difficult it becomes to replicate that knowledge (Grant 1996) and hence, the competitive advantage will be gained.

McKenzie & Van Winkelen, (2004,p.14,15) acknowledge that an organisation possesses unique bundles of resources generated by past investments and the historical decisions of its owners and managers, including both tangible resources such as buildings, equipment, financial resources, raw materials and other inventory and intangible resources like reputation, brand ownership, and protected proprietary technology. These cannot be ‘seen’ and ‘touched’ in the same way but are equally valuable that can make a competitive difference.

Porter (1985) suggests a cost competitive advantage can be achieved through a firm being able to deliver on a number of variables.. It is evident from the findings of this research that competitive advantage can be achieved through a cost advantage by improving its knowledge management.

A company’s knowledge management should reflect its competitive strategy: how it creates value for customers, how that value supports an economic model, and how the company’s people deliver on the value and the economics (Hansen et al, 1999)

As Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) emphasised, “one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge”.
2.5 Organisational Structure

Structure must follow strategy (Chandler 1962, Ducker 1977). Organisational structures differ in organisations to suit and support the requirements and aspirations of the business, and according to Gallagher (2011, p246) over a period of years it is natural that the organisations will evolve. Structures are changing everywhere in response to the need for more flexibility and openness (Allee, 1997,p.96). Kaplan and Norton (2006) believe that the search for new organisational structures is driven by changes in competition and in the economy, and that companies now derive their advantage not so much from managing physical assets but more from how they align intangible assets such as knowledge management, R&D and IT. Structure can influence knowledge management processes through shaping patterns and frequencies of communication among organisational members…and knowledge management can carry over the structural impact into organisational effectiveness, because the way knowledge management is organised, coordinated and embedded in the daily work processes influence the effectiveness and efficiency of organisational performance (Zheng et al, 2010). Du Plessis (2006, p.80) asserts that knowledge structures should be flexible, be able to adapt as the business environment changes and are normally built based on the value chain of the organisation. Porter (1985,p.61) states that an organisational structure that corresponds to the value chain will improve a firm’s ability to create and sustain competitive advantage.
2.6 Organisational Culture

Culture is a dynamic business resource which has its own potential and assists firms to achieve sustained competitive advantage. (Kamaluddin & Rahman, 2010)

Organisational culture as is frequently described as “the way we do things around here”. Handy (1993), Drucker (1999). It is a quirky and light-hearted description but it does portray an image of what organisational culture is all about. Organisation culture influences the thoughts, feelings, communication and performance in an organisation, (Yusof and Ali, 2000), and significantly affects the satisfaction, loyalty and commitment of the human capital, not only an individual but also the organisation members.

Kamaluddin & Rahman (2010) assert that a strong organisational culture which encourages learning, empowerment which improves the quality of decisions in performing tasks, human creativity to suit the current needs of business environment may enhance human capabilities, knowledge, skill and satisfaction, and thus lead to high firms performance.

Johnson, Scholes and Whittington (2008, p194-195) state that “the culture of an organisation is often conceived as consisting of four layers – values, beliefs, behaviours and the paradigm.

The paradigm is the central core of an organisation’s culture, it is essentially the intangible heartbeat which drives company strategy, based on what is commonly referred to as taken-for-granted assumptions that are held in common within an organisation. An appropriate model to use to assist understanding of organizational culture is the cultural web (Fig.3):
These traits represent how an organisation is perceived, both in an internal and external environment. They are a collective set of characteristics which generally have evolved and developed over a period of time based on the organisation’s activities, experience, spirit and ethics. The web should be used as a management tool to analyse, by asking the appropriate questions of itself, how the indigenous organisational culture can be best utilised to aid more effective management and to generate competitive advantage.

Charles Handy outlines different types of culture; - *power, role, task and person*. To paraphrase Handy (1993) there is no right or wrong culture, each type can be positive and effective, but where many organisations or leaders fail is believing that what worked successfully previously or elsewhere is guaranteed to work everywhere.
2.7 Organisational Strategy

Knowledge, even though intangible, can be part of the strategic process in the organization (Spender, 1996).

Zheng et al (2010) argue that organizational strategy has generally been left out in knowledge management studies…and few studies examine how organisational strategy can influence knowledge management (Senge, 1990; Pedlar et al, 1991; Watkins & Marsick, 1996). However, a firm’s strategy is defined as its theory about how to gain competitive advantage (Barney & Hesterley, 2006), and Michael Porter has written extensively on this area. Strategy is the direction and scope of an organization over the long term (Yi-Hua & Hai-Ming, 2011) and is the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities (Porter, 1996), and Zack (1999) argues that knowledge is strategic.

Competitive strategy concerns how to create competitive advantage (Porter, 1988), and the concept of business strategy is primarily derived from Porter (1985). Organisations are becoming increasingly dependent on knowledge and KM is now an integral part of an organisation’s strategy development and execution (Cruywagen et al, 2008; Minonne & Turner, 2009) and the foundation of strategic success relies on the effective management of an organisation's knowledge.

Strategy-making is a very contentious topic with divergent opinions on the process of strategy-making (Porter, 1996), while Yi-Hua & Hai-Ming (2011) assert that strategy is a rational decision-making process in which the organization’s resources are matched with opportunities arising from the competitive environment but the strategy to achieve competitive advantage is not the same for all organizations, a point supported by Cruywagen et al (2008) who state that ‘one size does not fit all’. Powers & Hahn (2004) believe that achieving a competitive advantage through strategic initiatives is becoming increasingly
important. Operational effectiveness and strategy are both essential to superior performance, which, after all is the primary goal of any enterprise. But they work in very different ways. (Porter 1996), and a company must continually improve its operational effectiveness, and strategic continuity, in fact, should make an organisation’s continual improvement more effective. Zheng et al (2010) believe that it is time to construct a more complex picture of how organizational structural, cultural, and strategic characteristics exert a combined effect on knowledge management and ultimately organizational effectiveness.

Zach (2002) suggests that if an organisation has more knowledge than is needed to execute its strategy (there is an internal knowledge opportunity), or more knowledge than most players in the industry (an external knowledge opportunity) then one important area of strategic choice would be how to become an efficient knowledge exploiter. This means actively seeking to apply the knowledge within the same or across other competitive niches according to (Mckenzie and van Winkelen,2004,p.33), who state that “although knowledge appreciates rather than depreciates with use, it can still become redundant if other knowledge supersedes it or competitors catch up. So managers need to focus on how to turn existing knowledge resources into value to compete effectively today and look to the future by exploring the potential business opportunities offered by new ideas and knowledge” (McKenzie & Van Winkelen, 2004, p18)

A study by Wen-Hui et al (2012) aimed to harmonize the ‘Strategy-Capability-Knowledge’ (SCK) link, and concluded that the SCK link built by harmonizing organizational capabilities with firms’ knowledge and strategies, can contribute to explain the path of how knowledge can help a firm achieve its strategic goals, and further, to align its knowledge management with its strategies. Whether a firm could acquire competitive advantage depend heavily on the effective execution of its strategies.
2.8 Leadership

The role of Leadership is seen to be essential in instigating, directing and managing the strategy by which improved organisational effectiveness and sustainable competitive advantage can be achieved by means of a proactive knowledge management culture and function within an organisation. “The traditional roles of leaders include providing visionary direction, providing a communication channel, finding the way forward, and leading change based on mutual trust with organization members” (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Dessler, 2000; Yukl, 2010). New economy leadership is essential to create a culture conducive for knowledge management (Du Plessis, 2006,p.45) In the context of KM the above assertion supports the view that “the roles of supportive and transformational leaders are a fundamental component for creating new knowledge, which is the basic component for organisational long-term success” (Nonaka et al., 2001; Hoon-Song et al,2012).

Oreg and Berson research examines the significance of the influence that leaders’ personal qualities and characteristics has on employees’ reactions in the context of organisational change, and the link between them. It measures leadership qualities against dispositional resistance to change among employees. One of its conclusions is that knowing that a leader’s personal characteristics has a meaningful impact on employees’ reactions to change, several options exist that could assist in facilitating the change process.

Senior and Fleming (2006, p.250 – 264) examine leadership approaches and behaviour in the context of managing change, and compare and contrast the subtleties of transactional and transformational leadership in the following illustration (Figure 4.)
Commitment by leaders to encourage and support all efforts associated with making KM work within the organisation, and to be clearly seen by subordinate managers and the workforce to be doing so, is imperative for any such strategy to succeed. Adequate investment in the key resources to facilitate the successful execution of the strategy – people and technology- must also be made with resolute commitment.

Leadership encourages the quality and quantity of organizational knowledge creation as a type of organizational performance (von Krogh et al., 2000), and according to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), von Krogh et al.(2000), and Hoon- Song et al (2012), the roles of supportive leaders are a primary influence on effective knowledge creation, collation and sharing practices within an organisation, and once supported and bought into by an engaged and motivated workforce leads to increased organisational effectiveness. “Transformational leadership positively influences the level of employees’ work engagement and knowledge-based performance.”(Hoon- Song et al ,2012)

Source : Senior and Fleming (2006)
Leaders and senior management have the capability and power to mobilize and allocate resources and promulgate rules and norms as knowledge resources. Through these actions, management *configures* the knowledge resources. The people-management skill of a leader is also hugely important in articulating and implementing the strategies it wishes the organization to espouse. It is a gross misconception to assume that a leader automatically possesses such requisite skills. Communication skills allied to people management capabilities are essential characteristics of good leadership, particularly when effecting change of any kind in an organization is necessary (Drucker, 1999; Dessler, 2000). Communication is often the most neglected element of organizational change (Dive, 2004), and an essential element of successful organization change is support from the top of the organization.

As can be seen in the *Findings and Discussion* chapter, the role of leadership is considered to be of paramount importance in effecting the change and culture within organizations to generate the ultimate organizational objectives of effectiveness, efficiency and competitiveness via knowledge. According to Boyatzis (2008), sustained, desired change represents a metamorphosis in actions, habits, or competencies associated with leadership effectiveness.

Positive leadership is associated with extraordinarily positive outcomes. Although leaders must constantly address threats, problems, and challenges, positive leaders engender that which is life giving, elevating, and virtuous by enabling a positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning—resulting in positively deviant performance. (Cameron, 2010). An effective leader makes his subordinates feel that they are a part of the organization and share an involvement in the company's operations (Boyatzis, 1971)
Several works suggest links between CEO and organizational characteristics (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Schneider, 1987; Hoffman & Hegarty, 1993; Berson et al., 2008) as illustrated in Figure 5.

**Fig 5.** – Linking CEO Values to Organisational Culture and Outcomes

![Diagram showing the relationship between CEO Values, Organisational Culture, and Organisational Outcomes.](image)

*Source:* Berson, Oreg, & Dvir, 2008,

Some CEO’s have put knowledge at the top of their agendas. Others have not given it the same attention as they have cost cutting, restructuring or international expansion. In companies where that is the case, knowledge management takes place - if at all – in functional departments such as HR or IT. But companies that isolate knowledge management risk losing its benefits, which are highest when coordinated with HR, IT, and competitive strategy. That coordination requires the leadership of the general manager. When CEO’s and general managers actively choose a knowledge management approach, one that supports a clear competitive strategy, both the company and its customers benefit. When top people fail to make such a choice, both suffer (Hansen et al., 1999)
2.9 Human Capital

Employees are the human capital of an organization. An organization’s employees provide an important basis for a sustainable competitive advantage (Yi Hua & Hai Ming, 2011) and human resources are invisible assets that create value when they are embedded in the operational systems in a manner that enhances the firm’s ability to implement a particular strategy (Chang & Huang, 2005). Human capital is among key organisational resources that are hard to imitate therefore, maintaining and developing it is crucial for organizations to stay in the forefront (Ndinguri et al., 2012) and is defined by Kaplan & Norton (1996) as knowledge embedded in the minds of individuals which include knowledge, competencies, experience and expertise. According to the resource-based view (Malik & Aminu, 2011; Yi Hua & Hai Ming, 2011), the firm is regarded as a unit of resources and capabilities, and provides a logical link between human resource management and strategic management, and their potential to generate a competitive advantage. Allen et al (2007) expand on this stating that when an organizational human resource strategy is properly configured, it provides a direct and economically significant contribution to organizational performance.

The importance and impact of human and intellectual capital in driving business performance is becoming an increasingly researched area in recent years, (Riahi-Belkaoui, 2003; Wang and Chang, 2005; Tseng and Goo, 2005; Chen et al., 2005; and Kamaluddin and Rahman (2010) strongly emphasise the link between intellectual capital and competitive success, arguing that it underpins the future value of companies and that future competitive advantage depends more on the strategic management of human and intellectual capital than on traditional strategies of the allocation of physical and financial resources. Nandita (2013) states that knowledge management is essentially a people related discipline, with focus on strengthening collaborative team effort to leverage collective knowledge of the enterprise. People are the source of competitive advantage (Singh, 2012) and people with the right
competencies in the right jobs mean competitive advantage and producing better profitability, which serves the ultimate goals of a good business to maximize the satisfaction of the owners and customers.

However, Kazlauskaitė, & Bučiūnienė, (2008) argue that there is no consensus in the literature as to what in particular serves as a source of competitive advantage – the possession of unique and valuable human resources, or the effective management of same? Drawing on prior research, this study aims to further develop this theme during the qualitative research process.

2.10 Organisational Learning

With change as the only constant in today’s global economy, organisations need to build learning capability - adaptive learning as well as generative learning,- to enhance the ability of employees at all levels to learn faster than competitors from their own successes and failures as well as that of others. (Beheshtifar, 2012). Organisational learning, or “learning by the collective organisation” argue Salas & Von Glinow (2008) should potentially involve the replication and storage of individual learning, with access to the disseminated information throughout the organisation. According Singh (2012), one of the bases for competitive advantage is the ability to create knowledge and move it from one part of the organization to another. The creation of knowledge is a dynamic and continuous process involving interactions at various organisational levels.

Additionally, learning in organisations can be aimed to 1) generate knowledge variation within organisations and 2) acquire knowledge of the knowledge already available within organisations. Therefore, learning processes in organisations involve a tension between
creating and assimilating new knowledge; knowledge exploration- and diffusing and using what has been learnt from the past; knowledge exploitation- (March, 1991).

Learning is one process that plays an important role in enhancing a firm’s capabilities and competitive advantage (Beheshtifar, 2012), and knowledge asset dynamics mainly stems from the interactions between firm knowledge assets and is enabled by organisational learning mechanism(Ming-Hong et al, 2012)

There is general consensus in the research literature that there are several key components needed to foster a culture of organisational learning and knowledge into the core competences of an organisation, and Burke and Cooper (2008) cite Salas & Von Glinow (2008) and Crossan et al (1999) as identifying these factors as; (i) the influence of leadership on organisational culture, (ii) creating a culture conducive to organisational learning and knowledge sharing, (iii) facilitating the sharing and dissemination of knowledge, and generating new knowledge and competences as a result, and (iv) developing a competitive advantage with acquired and generated knowledge, i.e. a knowledge-based advantage.

2.11 Conclusion

This research examines the issue of effective knowledge management from the perspective of organizational capabilities. This perspective suggests that a knowledge infrastructure consisting of technology, structure, and culture along with a knowledge process architecture of acquisition, conversion, application, and protection are essential organizational capabilities or "preconditions" for effective knowledge management. (Gold et al, 2001)
3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the background to the research, the methodology and techniques employed in conducting the research, together with explanation and justification as to why such methods and techniques were used to produce the research findings that follow. Research methods are traditionally chosen prior to data generation based on the nature, aims and goals of the research project (Reiter et al, 2011) and once my research topic had been selected, thorough consideration was given to the applicable methods most appropriate to meet the criteria set out in the research objective. Establishing the most appropriate methods and techniques to use is a catalyst for sound research, but not a straightforward choice. Marais (2012) makes a subtle distinction between ‘research’ being the uncovering of the truth about a phenomenon (and/or its relationship with other phenomena) by means of scientific methods, and ‘empirical research’ being research that relies on one or more forms of observation/measurement for gathering information. This distinction proved useful for me as I studied the various methods and techniques that I could most appropriately apply to meet the objectives of my study and gain a deeper understanding of the research topic.

It was also the intention from the outset to apply methodological rigour to this research project, which refers to the clarity, appropriateness and intellectual soundness of the overall methodology (Collis and Hussey, 2003). This entire research design is underpinned by the above baseline. Saunders et al (2012) define research design as a framework for the collection and analysis of data to answer research question and meet research objectives providing reasoned justification for choice of data sources, collection methods and analysis.
techniques. It is within the context of such a framework that the entire research process and design of this dissertation is developed and executed.

3.2 Research Method

Having decided on a relevant topic, due consideration was given to the most appropriate and meaningful methodology by which the research would be conducted. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were examined, together with a contemplation of a pluralistic approach, whereby a combination of both methods could be used.

According to Bryman (2006) “combining quantitative and qualitative research has become unexceptional and unremarkable in recent years”. Brannick (Brannick & Roche, 1997) questions the traditional portrayal of the qualitative/quantitative research dichotomy as two distinct opposing approaches to research. There is a common (mistaken) perception out there that in a simplistic sense, qualitative research is captured by words, whereas quantitative refers to numbers. Marais (2012) describes qualitative research as research that approaches phenomena from the perspective of the insider or subject in order to understanding the phenomena in their natural context, using indicators such as words, stories, pictures and other communicative representations as non-numerical symbolic information on phenomena. Its methodologies are normally less formalised, rigid, specific and explicated, but more comprehensively recorded, whereas with quantitative methods the research approaches phenomena from the perspective of the outsider in order to explain and predict the phenomenon under study in isolation. This approach uses numerical indicators of abstract concepts; its methodology is normally relatively formalised, rigid, cross-referenced and explicated, but more parsimoniously recorded by means of statistics. With constant cognisance of my research objective, the method selection ruled out quantitative and
pluralistic methods on the grounds that they would not generate the findings I was hoping to uncover, nor add value to the overall study.

As this is an investigative research study about a topic of which I have limited knowledge but much interest, I concluded that the most appropriate method by which I could gain a deeper understanding and develop clearer insights was to employ qualitative research methods to meet the research objective. According to Zikmund (2003, p111) exploratory research provides greater understanding of a concept rather than providing precise measurement or quantification, and much, though certainly not all, exploratory research provides qualitative data.

Interviews with suitable and accessible participants in the context of the research topic is one of the most fundamental of qualitative methods, and the method chosen for this research as the most appropriate in producing the desired results and outcome. Easterby-Smith et al (2008, p.87) cite Jones (1985) who reasons that the primary purpose of conducting qualitative interviews is to understand ‘how individuals construct the reality of their situation formed from the complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives in order to explain and predict events in their world’. This was exactly the type of understanding I was attempting to gain, and the reason for choosing senior and experienced business people as my interviewees, with a view to extracting their views and theories from within their ‘complex personal framework of beliefs and values’.

Qualitative research, however, is not appropriate to answer every research ‘question’, therefore the research objective must be clear, and it also has limitations, - it is heavily dependent on the researcher’s personal skills, also dependent on the openness and engagement of the participants. The complexity of individual interviews can be onerous irrespective of the willingness of the participants as I have found, and can produce biased or
subjective findings, particularly as sample sizes are typically small. It can also be difficult to analyse and generalise findings, and tedious and time-consuming to code and present them. It is the view of Bryman & Bell (2003,p.285) that ‘concepts are very much part of the landscape in qualitative research….however, the way in which concepts are developed and employed is often rather different from that implied in a quantitative research strategy.

My conclusion was that the topic is more conducive to be an empirical research, in the sense that whilst it seeks to answer a question, it is primarily based on observations and analysis of information gathered to develop research findings, rather than producing a definitive answer. It is also possible that the process may produce findings that could not have been predicted at the outset, or that may lead the research in different directions to what may have been originally expected. The topic does not lend itself to being able to readily quantify. Having given due consideration to the various options, it was decided to proceed with a qualitative research method, one that involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of data that could not easily be converted to numbers. Patton (2002) defines qualitative research as not necessarily predicting what might occur, but attempting to understand in depth the characteristics of the research study and the meaning and value brought by the participants, which is the intention of this study. According to Creswell(2009) “A qualitative study is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting”. This is what this research study sets out to accomplish within the context of the topic.
3.3 Research Design

In order to clearly map out the research methodology and design that this research wished to adopt, the following model (Fig. 6) proved to be a useful guide to help formulate the various stages of the research process.

**Fig. 6 Research Onion – Source: Saunders et al 2012**

The ‘research onion’ (Saunders et al, 2012) provides a framework design for the research process. By examining, or peeling back, the various layers of the onion, within the context of the research topic and its objectives, a design emerges to illustrate the most appropriate philosophy, approach, and strategy to adopt. It is not necessarily a perfect or definitive
template but this researcher deemed it a useful roadmap, where by working through the onion layers in a sequential, step by step, manner enabled me to construct a research design and strategy to reflect my research objective and desired outcome.

3.4. Research Philosophy

Mkansi,& Acheampong, (2012), argue that research philosophy classifications such as ontology, epistemology, and anxiology, and their conflicting applications to the ‘quantitative-qualitative’ debates, are a major source of dilemma to research students in establishing their relevance to subjects areas and discipline. Using the ‘onion’ as a guide, in order to develop a workable research philosophy it is again necessary to consider the objectives of the research, in the context of the research topic/question. The research wishes to explore the link between KM, OE and CA, and the influencers contained in the Zheng et al model, in a real-life setting. The research philosophy adopted therefore influences and reinforces the entire research design and strategy. The literature describes and defines philosophies and philosophical concepts which direct the research, and in the context of this study, epistemology defines how knowledge can be produced and the criteria by which knowledge is possible. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2007,p.14) epistemology is concerned with the questions ‘What is knowledge and what are the sources and limits of knowledge?’ It is concerned with the relationship between the “knower” (the research participant) and the “would-be knower” (the researcher) ( Ponterotto, 2005). It is a study of real-life experiences and situations, which cannot be readily measured. It is therefore a study of phenomena, which according to Saunders et al (2012) is a research philosophy that is particularly concerned with generating meanings and gaining insights into those phenomena. Phenomenolgy essentially is the manner in which people experience events or situations, and how they are interpreted.
Referring to the research onion, phenomenology falls within the domain of interpretivism, which according to Bryman & Bell (2003) reflects ‘the distinctiveness of humans against that of the natural sciences’, and the research philosophy which this study reflects. The interpretivism philosophy leads to an approach adopted by this researcher, whereby the research was conducted without any bias, beliefs or pre-conceptions and therefore facilitating the emergence of ideas, perspectives, and opinions.

3.5. Research Approach

The two widely considered approaches in the field of research study, and as illustrated in the research onion, are **deductive** and **inductive** approaches. **Deduction** is a method that involves “going from generals to particulars; deriving conclusions based on premises through the use of a system of logic”, (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011) whereas **induction** is a method that involves “going from particulars to generals; deriving knowledge from empirical experience based upon a system of handling sense data” and is typically associated with a bottom-up approach to theory building that starts with data.

This research centres on an inductive approach, which is conducive to the qualitative method, but not exclusively so. The primary themes this study proposes to research are the subject of much previous research, with an abundance of literature in existence to support derived hypotheses. This could lend itself to a deductive approach, by focussing on the literature to test and analyse the hypotheses. However, this research study is primarily investigating the link between the primary themes, and the emergent themes, for which existing literature or research findings are limited. The inductive approach that this research adopted focussed on allowing the data and themes to emerge from the interview stage by eliciting participant-driven commentary and tacit understanding of the themes and overall concept. It endeavoured
to facilitate the emergence of new or unique data to be categorised based on interpretations of
the researcher. But qualitative content analysis does not need to exclude deductive reasoning
(Patton, 2001) and considering the value of previously researched material that exists on the
primary themes of KM, OE and CA, it would be short-sighted on the researcher’s behalf to
ignore previous studies entirely. And whilst the two approaches would appear to be
completely opposite, Saunders et al (2012) argue that it is perfectly possible to combine both
approaches. Understanding the connotations of both approaches, within the context of my
research study, allowed the researcher to pursue the inductive approach to, as quoted above, -
‘derive knowledge from empirical experience based upon a system of handling sense data’.

3.6 Research Strategy

Working through the layers of the research onion, the research strategy is typically derived
from the research philosophy and approach within the context of the research study. In
evaluating what this study is endeavouring to accomplish, it was the opinion of the researcher
that a grounded theory strategy was most appropriate. Grounded theory is essentially a
strategy in which the theory develops from the data, following the inductive approach. The
researcher recognised the need for flexibility in employing this strategy, as it provides for
emergent themes and theories that may contradict or conflict with preconceived ideas held by
the researcher. It was, however, considered likely to be a challenge at the data collection
stage,- the researcher leaving aside any subjective or prejudiced view to maximise the
opportunity for new or interesting grounded theory to emerge. Grounded theory is derived
from the inductive approach and interpretivism philosophy and therefore consistent in
methodology in terms of what this research study proposes to achieve.
3.7 Grounded Theory

The grounded theory method emerged and developed in significance over the years from the seminal work of Glaser & Strauss (1967), who continued to build up the method over the years independently of each other. It has established an eternally accepted selection of methodology for social researchers since its growth in the 1960s (Zarif, 2012), and is derived from the phenomenon under study. Grounded theory is not a preconceived or rigid form of theory. Strauss & Corbin (1998) assert that grounded theory research is discovered empirically, through induction, not deduction. It is theory grounded in data that is methodically acquired during the course of the research (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Although not exclusively a qualitative method, a grounded theory approach was considered both appropriate and value adding for this research. The researcher was looking for a way of explaining how participants generated their theories on the components of the Zheng et al model, and how their theories contributed relevance to this research objective. Holloway (1997) acknowledges that qualitative research is context-bound. This means that the researchers have to be sensitive to the context of the research and immerse themselves in the setting and situation.

The design of grounded theory research gives investigators important learning opportunities prior to formal research undertakings and helps them recognise the collection of verbal and symbolic assertions that sustain theory development by identifying the conditions under which the variables of a phenomenon are related (Campbell, 1990) and this proved to be very accurate for this researcher in making the linkages between, learning, understanding, and facilitating the emergent findings.

Carlson and McCaslin (2003:553) also argue in favour of considering contextual constructs in the development of grounded theory-based projects. In the absence of what they define as a
meta-inquiry, “grounded theory can erroneously create a grand tour question and subsequent main and probing questions from an incomplete perspective”. Studies such as this one can therefore contribute to render such contextual representations suitable to inductive reasoning, as the four-tiered model represented in Fig. 7 illustrates:

**Fig. 7 : Contextual knowledge elicitation for inductive approaches**

Source: adapted from Nunes et al (2010), 'Contextual Sensitivity in Grounded Theory:

Glaser (1998) defines grounded theory as “the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method”. Grounded theory is used to investigate problems of why and how in a systematic way, one that is "grounded" in the data itself rather than being deduced logically or hypothetically, according to Jones (2009), and often employs interviewing as its data collection technique.

As with any methodology, there are potential criticisms and limitations of grounded theory as an appropriate research tool for this study. A common criticism of grounded theory studies is that they are not "real" research as referred to by Jones (2009) and Dunne (2011). However, every methodology and technique has its limitations in isolation, it was the view of this researcher that the grounded theory approach appeared to be the most appropriate in this research study and interviews are particularly suited for this approach. Fontana and Frey
(1991) stated, "the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the hows of people's lives…as well as the traditional whats". These ‘hows’ and ‘whats’ are exactly what this researcher was seeking.

3.8 Time Horizons

This research study also adopted a cross-sectional time horizon, whereby the data is collected and analysed over a particular, and short window in time. Whilst this study could be potentially have been conducted by means of longitudinal research over a greater period of time (which could possibly have added value to the findings), the nature of this research study and constraints imposed by the dissertation timeline made that impractical.

3.9 Population and Sample

Research interviews were conducted with a select number of senior business people in order to provide a rich cross-section of data. In quantitative research, samples would generally be quite large so that statistical results could be generated from, and for, the population from which the sample was taken. Typically in qualitative research, the sample size is relatively small, but participants are approached and selected according to their suitability as perceived by the researcher, as is outlined in 3.10. This is a method known as purposeful sampling and while the sample size is small it is as rigorous a process, if not more so, than a statistical based quantitative equivalent.
3.10 Research Interviews

Knowledge is produced through a ‘qualitative’ research encounter that should be understood as the product of a specific interaction between researcher and informants. (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006)

The interviewing techniques employed by this researcher were based on both what I considered would be most beneficial in attempting to elicit finding in the context of the research objective (Zheng et al model), and on real life experience of interviewing people in the course of my working career. There are essentially several styles that can be assumed by the interviewer, depending on the primary objective. One such style, according to Fontana & Frey (1991) calls for a rather passive, non-directive approach where the interviewer-observer only asks enough questions or probes on a limited basis or offers reinforcement to keep a discussion going. In such cases the interview may be exploratory or phenomenological where unstructured questioning is employed. This type of interviewing is more plausible in a setting that is informal or naturally occurring. It was by this non-directive, semi-structured approach that the interviews for this study were conducted.

A total of nine no. interviews were carried out in total, as set out in the interview schedule. Under agreement with my dissertation supervisor, four no. were transcribed verbatim and submitted to my supervisor, both to demonstrate authenticity, and to support my research findings. Access was not an issue and the participants were selected on the basis of my personal knowledge of either the individuals or their organisations, and on the value I believed the chosen participants could add to my study. All participants are, or have been previously, leaders and/or senior business people in contemporary business organisations.

The intention was that the interview process, based on the inductive approach, was conducted in a manner to facilitate the emergence of grounded theory. “Semi-structured interviews are
for both grounded theory and phenomenology the most common mode of data generation” (Reiter et al., 2011). In order to achieve this, interviews were of a semi-structured nature, whereby the researcher endeavoured to elicit the data using semi-formal interview techniques. The research topic themes to be discussed, loosely based on the tentative hypotheses in Appendix 1, were advised to participants in advance by email, of such together with the informed consent form. In order not to compromise the interview or prejudice the outcome, it was not the intention of the researcher to prepare a set of rigid, leading, or biased questions. The purpose was to gain the confidence and interest of the participants by adopting the semi-structured approach, allowing the discussion to ‘flow’, with the participant playing the leading role, prompted by the researcher. What occurred and emerged during the interviews could not have been predicted in advance, and although questions and directions differed in accordance with the participant being interviewed, the respondent articulation on themes required on the spot deviation from anticipated flow on my behalf.

Effective interviewing techniques are essential to achieve the desired results from the interview process. “One of the key best practices in interviewing excellently is the ability to take control of the interview or shape the direction of the interview” (Leanne, 2004). From a personal perspective I possess a significant amount of interviewing experience in the context of my professional career which mitigated what for some research students can be the daunting prospect of the interview process. Once ethical guidelines had been established and confirmed verbally in line with the pre-transmitted consent form (Appendix 2) it was the interview techniques employed and respondents’ willingness to engage that determined the quality of the emergent grounded theory. Suitable and mutually convenient venues were chosen and arranged in advance, typically at the workplace of the participant, and interview
durations ranged from between forty five and sixty minutes, although one did extend to almost ninety minutes.

3.11 Data Collection, Editing, Coding and Analysis

“The researcher who adopts a grounded theory approach, does not follow a linear path of research progression. The process of coding and analysis are in operation throughout the research process”. (Ng & Hase, 2008)

The innermost layer of the research ‘onion’ is described as ‘techniques and procedures’ and deals with data collection and analysis. Emanating from the grounded theory method, collection and analysis of data from the interviews is the next logical step in the process. Qualitative data analysis is a complex process, particularly when large volumes of research evidence is gathered and when the researcher is new to the interpretivist paradigm. The iterative nature of analysis and the importance of researcher reflection, interpretation, judgement and intuition mean that there are no clear rules to follow (Carcary, 2011) who also argues that despite its limitations, when the logic of the researcher’s interpretations can be traced, the interpretivist paradigm often leads to more interesting research findings. Relying on recordings and transcripts of the data collected, the researcher’s task was to interpret the meaning and significance of the data which has emerged, within the context of the research topic and themes. It is here, according to Saunders et al (2009) that there is the greatest danger of logic leaps and false assumptions, it’s unlikely to be a completely inductive process and may turn into a hybrid approach whereby an established theoretical construct could be used to help make sense of the findings. Data collection by audio-recording and copious note-taking formed an integral part of the process, in compliance with the participant’s wishes, of which there were no issues. The literature varies greatly in the
advantages and disadvantages of both techniques, so my own judgement was used to a large degree based on how the interview was proceeding and the nature of the discussion. To fully capture and develop the core emergent theories and themes a coding system compatible with grounded theory was employed. The major process through which a grounded theory is written up, is through sorting of the memos and notes that have been taken throughout the study process. According to Hernandez (2009), one of the most problematic areas, particularly for novice researchers, is the theoretical coding process which includes finding the theoretical code that will integrate the emerging substantive theory.

The first stage of analysis under a grounded theory methodology is coding (Collis & Hussey, 2009) who describe the three main categories as: open coding to capture individual themes, axial coding to capture the connection between themes and sub-themes, and selective coding to integrate the primary and significant emergent themes. Coding in this study was carried out by assiduous and repeated listening to the interview recordings, followed by meticulous note taking and simultaneous coding. The same process was followed once the audio recordings had been transcribed. As the coding evolved, my understanding of the phenomenon was also transformed, which matured as a direct result of the increased understanding that emerged through the analysis of transcripts and development of codes. Weston et al (2001) liken this process to continually ‘zooming in and out’, which is an apt description. Thorough and repeated analysis of both the recordings and transcripts enabled me capture the principal emergent themes as discussed in the Findings Section. Thematic analysis is a “process of encoding qualitative information” (Boyatzis, 1998) which is then applied to examine the categorised themes emerging from the process. According to Buetow (2010) thematic analysis is characteristic of most qualitative research, yet there is no clear agreement as to what it entails and it survives as a ‘poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method’. Themes are groups of codes that recur through being
similar or connected to each other in a patterned way. Thematic analysis ignores codes that do not recur yet may nonetheless be important. Given the investigative and interpretivist nature of this study, the researcher was satisfied that the primary objectives were achieved by this process of coding and analysis.

Akin to Dunne (2011), for this researcher this meant that as the data collection and analysis progressed, and ideas and tentative themes began to emerge, I began to consider how theories with which I was already familiar could perhaps be used to progress the analysis. Simultaneously, I also sought to identify new theories which could help explain or even contradict the multiple and diverse ideas emerging from the data analysis, in order to improve the quality, rigour and profundity of the analysis. (Dunne, 2011).

Reflexivity is a key requirement for ensuring rigor in qualitative studies (Long and Johnson, 2000), and as discussed in the Self-Reflection section of this study, it helps ensure that the researcher considers his/her own values and beliefs, while analysing the evidence collected and acknowledges that his/her actions will impact the context and meaning of the issue being investigated (Carcary, 2011). This was an important element of the process and tied together on behalf of the researcher the elements of transparency, honesty, confidentiality and sound ethical practice, as previously described, whilst allowing the research produce accurate and relevant findings in the context of the research objective.

3.12 Ethical Issues and Procedure

Ethics applied to research can be seen as a method of self-regulation whereby different disciplines attempt to demonstrate a professional approach to research (Mauthner et al, 2002). It was the unconditional intention of this study that all best practice would be stringently
applied in throughout the research and interview process. According to Blumberg et al (2005,p.92) research ethics address not the question of how to use methodology in a proper way to conduct sound research, but the question of how the available methodology may be used in the ‘right’ way. This suggests that the researcher should contemplate and find the best compromise solution to ensure that both theoretical methods and real-life practicality are fused to conduct the interviews in an ethical manner whilst all the time endeavouring to acquire information and findings within the context of the research study. Participants were assured of absolute discretion and anonymity by means of an informed consent form (Appendix 2) prior to interviews being conducted, and confidentiality was assured and upheld without exception. A verbalised confirmation was communicated to all participants prior to start of each interview that all information proffered by participants would be treated confidentially and not used for any purpose outside the scope of this study. The informed consent form underpins the ethical approach to the process.

Pimple, in a chapter of Research Ethics (Penslar,1995) divides ethical problems researchers are likely to face into three categories; - ignorance, stress, and misconduct. It is understandable, but inexcusable, that ignorance and stress can lead to circumstantial unethical actions. It was the view, however, of this researcher that these risks can be managed out by proper preparation and planning thereby preventing any unknowing unethical issues arising, and it was on this basis that the interviews were carried out. Misconduct is a more predetermined ethical offence and this researcher guaranteed that no such misconduct was remotely considered. The verbatim transcripts prove the authenticity of the interviews, confidentiality was maintained by submitting these transcripts to my dissertation supervisor only, and transcripts were not included for public consumption.

Another ethical concern is the issue of plagiarism. It can be a fine line between plagiarising the work of others and unwittingly not referencing sources of information or data correctly.
Stringent attention was applied to the use of a recognised referencing system (e.g. Harvard Referencing System) for secondary research data, and all primary data is properly attributed to the originating source.

3.13 Conclusion

The journey through the research process and methodology, using the ‘Onion’ as a guide provided a roadmap by which to establish the most appropriate methods to employ in the context of this research study and objectives. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, I believe that the methodology chosen proved to be most appropriate in fulfilling the requirements of the research objective.
4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the findings emanating from the grounded theory process and discusses the emergent themes within the context of the research objective.

Details of selected participants, transcripts, and durations, are included on the interview schedule, which for reasons of confidentiality were submitted independently to my dissertation supervisor. To maintain ethical and confidentiality best practice, the four interviews selected will hereafter be referred to as Participants A, B, C, & D.

The Zheng et al (2010) study findings indicate that knowledge management can influence organizational effectiveness when it is in alignment with organizational culture, structure, and strategy, and of the three organizational factors, culture has emerged from the interviews as a strong positive influence on organisational effectiveness. The purpose and objective of this study was to investigate if the findings of Zheng et al lead, in turn, to competitive advantage, and what further, if any, organisational factors exerted significant influence in this regard.

A key theory to evaluate with research participants was the level of importance placed on KM, where it sits in the context of their organisational structure, culture and strategy, and whether the economic downturn of recent years has led, or forced, them to re-evaluate their emphasis on what may be considered a ‘soft’ management function, or even a luxury?

“Organisational knowledge relates to cultures, structures, technology and the unique configuration of individuals that make up the organisation” (Allee, 1997, p87). Rigorous analysis of the research interviews supports Allee’s assertion. As will be seen, culture, structure, and people are among the foremost themes that emerge, from the plethora of opinions, perspectives and interpretations emanating from the interview process.
The central linking theme of the research study is the concept of *Organisational Effectiveness*, with several contributors feeding into the concept, and the benefits (Competitive Advantage) emanating from it. Organisational Effectiveness is a relatively widely researched topic, but it can mean different things to different people, it covers a wide range of organisational functions and is made up of a myriad of contributing factors and sub-themes. Common consensus emerged as to an intrinsic link between Knowledge Management, Organisational Effectiveness and Competitive Advantage, although perceptions and perspectives differed on the detail and meaning of each of the three principal components of the research question. This concept was investigated as part of the research study, where participants were actively encouraged to express their views on organisational effectiveness within the context of their respective organisations, and it was interesting to assess from the interviews the differing perspectives business leaders opined as being key drivers. As stated in the literature section (Cruywagen et al., 2008) ‘one size does not fit all’.

### 4.2 Knowledge as a key driver of Competitive Advantage?

This central theme was explored with participants, who were asked if they believed that successful management of their organisational knowledge contributed to overall organisational effectiveness and was a key source of competitive advantage, and it was broadly accepted that structured and systematic knowledge management is tightly linked with gaining and sustaining competitive advantage. A number of the participants interviewed are, as the researcher is, or were, involved in the construction industry and were in absolute agreement that knowledge is a hugely significant and valuable competence and asset that we do not, or have not, managed as effectively as we might in generating competitive advantage, a view supported by Carrillo & Chinowski, (2006) and Kale & Karaman (2012), who believe
that knowledge management is rapidly becoming a key organizational capability for creating competitive advantage in the construction industry.

However, when questioned as to how this organisational knowledge was, or could be, captured, stored, shared and transmitted within their respective organisations, the responses were less conclusive and Participant B, (a former Managing Director of a very successful construction company and eminent figure in Irish industry) openly admitted “I’m not certain {XXXX} did it as well as they should have. It was never done in a structured fashion. It’s the structured collection of knowledge that’s the real issue”. Participant C was very clear on what he expects from companies who approach his organisation with a view to achieving accreditation for KM, highlighting the sales pitch from clients who say “we definitely want to bring about a competitive advantage through knowledge” and what we say to them is “that’s great that you want to do that, but it’s not in your strategy anywhere, and then there’s normally silence”. The linkage from structure and strategy, two of the enablers in the Zheng et al model, very clearly emanate from the interviews.

Participant A was very passionate about the subject and had a clear view on the potential benefits of KM and its impact on competitive advantage, but expressed very vehemently that in his opinion, many organisations believe that if they have information sharing systems that they have KM, and see no need for further investment, a big mistake in his eyes, “Most companies in Ireland will say they have KM, but they don’t, and they’re not prepared to put people and money behind it”, going on to state that during the Celtic Tiger years in Ireland we had the money, but not the time, to invest in dedicated KM, now it’s the reverse situation.
4.3 Emergent Themes

The qualitative research method by means of a high level interview process proved to be highly significant in meeting the objectives of this research. The quality of the participants, all vastly experienced and senior people within their respective organisations, greatly added to the richness of the material emanating from the process. No two participants identified exactly the same answers to the research question, but a number of common themes clearly and quickly emerged, which in turn gave rise to further exploration and discussion. These emergent themes are considered in detail in the Literature Review chapter.

Having expounded on the three principal themes of the research study, grounded on an extension of the Zheng et al model, a number of sub-themes emerged from the interviews which further feed into the study. The Zheng et al model categorise these feeder themes as Organisational Structure, Culture and Strategy, but the interview participants delved into areas such as Leadership, Human Capital, Learning and Development, Talent Management, Succession Planning, Change Management, Effective People Management and Stakeholder Management. These are all rich and individual topics in their own right, but there is a common theme running through them, i.e. people.

Talent management and knowledge management are closely interrelated according to Nandita, (2013) whilst the interview participants were unanimous in the views that aspects such as developing and retaining individual and organisational talent, effective management of change within an organisation, effective communication and proactive succession planning are all contributors to organisational effectiveness, and are all aspects that would typically be associated with progressive and successful business organisations.

An interesting concept which emerged from the interview process was that of strategic alliances, with many organisations now looking to grow or consolidate their business by
entering into alliances, partnerships, or joint ventures of some kind. Strategic alliances have become an integral part of contemporary thinking (Callon, 1996), with the motivation and aspiration for company executives being that such alliances will generate added value and competitive advantage for the organisation. Mergers and acquisitions continue to be a strategic function for many organisations, and are increasingly recognised, according to Youngjin et al. (2007), as an important mechanism by which firms acquire knowledge. Participants A, B and D all debated this theme, all having had first-hand experience of strategic alliances and who recognised and understood the opportunities to gain knowledge from such partnerships, from external sources, or become ‘knowledge exploiters’ as discussed by Zach (2002), Powers & Hahn (2004), and McKenzie & Van Winkelen (2004) in Chapter 2. Participant B summed it up by stating that it was not so much the technical knowledge which both parties would have had, and in any case it could have been easily recorded it being of the explicit nature, but more the intangible business and commercial acumen and knowledge “It’s an excellent example actually, and also within part of the knowledge they had to transmit to us was the experience of how they wrote and presented joint venture agreements, and the concerns they had, and fears they had, the experience that they had…. that’s how you protect yourself in a joint venture, there was a piece of knowledge which I hope we absorbed but I suspect we didn’t.”

Such mergers and alliances, however, are notoriously hindered by difficulties to integrate diverse knowledge resources and Participant D readily identified cultural differences and distrust as two chief factors in preventing knowledge flow between partners, corroborating the concept of ‘knowledge stickiness’ as discussed by Szulanski (1996) and Nonaka & Nishiguchi, (2001) in Chapter 2.

The study now focusses on the four strongest and most common themes to emerge:

leadership, people, culture and learning.
4.3.1 Leadership

The concept of Leadership emerged from the interview process as one of the over-riding factors and enablers in the context of the research topic. All participants unequivocally focussed in on leadership within an organisation as the key influencer to effect change of any sort. In terms of Knowledge Management, it was clearly expressed that irrespective of how technologically progressive or otherwise the in-house system may be, it was the direction and emphasis from top down that would be the major influence in determining how effective a knowledge management could be, and how it could positively impact on organisational effectiveness as a whole. Participant C is very clear on it- “leadership… that’s one of things I would link very strongly to knowledge management”. Participant A referred to CEO at a previous organisation he had worked for who was progressive in his commitment to this, stating “I understand what it’s about, I understand why we are doing it, I can absolutely see the value in it, and I’m going to force it down through the organisation to make it happen”. The participant’s admiration for, and belief in, that former CEO as he continued to extol his vision, values and principles was evident in his tone of voice and body language, a research element that a quantitative questionnaire could not possibly generate.

Participant D was equally effusive in his admiration for the founder and visionary leader of the organisation of which D is now CEO, expounding on the original leader’s transformational qualities and cult-like status, which is discussed in chapter 4.3.2.

Participant B looked at it from a different angle, arguing that the most effective leader is one who can convince employees that the success is down to the individuals and the collective efforts, and not himself, - “it’s the boss who makes people believe that they did it themselves, that they thought it up and that they delivered it and that it was all their doing, but you had put the structure in place quietly and effectively behind it”. This theory is
supported in chapter 2 (Boyatzis, 1971). Once the culture is initially formed, key leaders, and in particular CEOs, are responsible for managing the evolution of the organization’s basic assumptions and for modifying the culture in order to keep up with the changing demands of the environment (Berson et al., 2008) and all participants are broadly in agreement on this, the grounded theory on the influence of leadership and culture coming through very clearly.

4.3.2 Human Capital

In a study by O’Regan et al. (2001), both CEOs and CFOs in Irish knowledge-intensive firms perceive that approximately half of the intangible value derives directly from the people employed. It is a frequently used slogan or strapline for many organisations, particularly at company seminars and on corporate brochures and websites – “Our people are our greatest asset”. Company mission statements typically emphasise the value that the organisation places on its people. But, talk and slogans are cheap – do organisations really understand the value of their human capital, and do they walk the walk when it comes to people management? Participant A was unequivocal when questioned on the drivers of the knowledge economy, stating: “when you talk about the knowledge economy in Ireland, you’re talking about people, they are the valuable thing. And you’ve still got to hire the best people, and manage them effectively, but if you’re not capturing their knowledge, don’t be surprised when the knowledge walks out the door, and sets itself up down the road”.

The importance and influence of people, the human resources, or human capital, as emphasised by Iqbal et al.(2010), Ndinguri et al (2012), Malik & Aminu (2011) and Kazlauskaite & Buciuicne (2008), Kamaluddin and Rahman (2010) in utilising knowledge to generate competitive advantage is a theme that clearly emerges from the interviews. The
recognition by organisation leaders of its people as ‘knowledge workers’ even if such a term is not used on a daily functional basis appears to be increasingly obvious. The conundrum facing organisations is on how to effectively extract tacit knowledge from individuals and convert into a usable, collective form to progress the link from KM to OE to CA, which is supported by Participant A when he states that “Well it is all about people, it is the people who make it work,… It’s gone if you or I leave the company, the knowledge that’s in guys heads. It is the preserve of people but the question is… can you take it out and write it down? It takes an awful lot of work to get it written down and made useful, written down is one thing but useful is another, it has to be relevant and the resources required to get to that point are massive”.

This dilemma is widely acknowledged by business leaders, and the literature contains much a commentary on the subject. One the one hand organizational knowledge is deeply contextual and embedded in the intangible, especially human, resources of an organization. (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001). On the other hand, for anything to be managed, an element of objectification and dis-embedding is necessary Handling this paradox is an important task of organizational knowledge management. (Mylonopoulos, & Tsoukas, 2003). Although employees can benefit from obtaining and using knowledge that exists in other parts of the firm to perform competitive tasks, sharing knowledge across sub-units within a firm can be problematic and risky (Haas & Hansen , 2005). Attracting and retaining top talent is a major issue functional issue for organisations, and Participant D made the link between people and leadership - “I think the underpinning of the business really is the calibre of people that have been employed by the business over the years and for my money that was driven by the boss himself, (the company founder and driving force), he had tremendous drive, inspired real loyalty, and I suppose expected loyalty and rewarded loyalty as well, and the organisation still is very much founded on that.” This statement supports the theories of
Senior & Fleming (2006), Hoon-Song (2012) regarding the characteristics of transformational leadership, it is also connecting leadership and people, and an underlying basis is that he is inadvertently referring to the culture of the organisation, going on to state that his organisation, of which he is CEO, incurs churn levels well below industry average, particularly to competitors, and that “I think there’s a bit of buzz about coming to work for us as an organisation because we like to get it right and that, you know, that motivates people as well, if they see things being done properly”. Participant A supports this also stating that it is his belief that “if you hire the best people and you manage them properly, you don’t need all the processes and procedures, good people if well motivated, well paid etc., they don’t need processes, they will do the right thing anyway as long as you give them the guidance”.

Participant B adds further substance to the theory of human capital being a powerful and instrumental asset by contending that it is the people who will bring about the required structural, strategic and cultural change, stating “In this instance (KM) it’s much more subtle because what you need, what you’re saying here is to people is I want you to build a structure which will make the organisation more effective and more profitable at some future date in an intangible way that will never be attributed to me…”

In these extracts from the interview transcripts, the link from leadership through people and culture to improve organisational effectiveness and gain advantage over competitors can be very clearly traced.

4.3.3 Organisational Culture

The importance of organisational culture as a significant factor emerged as a leading theme. It was interesting to note that whilst culture was perceived by all participants as almost taken
for granted, among the manifestations of culture are rituals, group norms, habits of thinking and espoused values (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993) thereby supporting Charles Handy’s (1993) encapsulation as “the way we do things around here”. It is important that leaders are in tune with “the way we do things around here”, before attempting to introduce any structural or strategic changes, such as the implementation of a dedicated KM system, that may have a detrimental effect on the organisational culture.

According to Dessler (2011, p.535) managing people and shaping their behaviour depends on shaping the values they use as behavioural guides. The firm’s culture should therefore send clear signals about what is and isn’t acceptable behaviour and participants were in broad agreement that people will engage and actively buy into the organisational culture if (a) the leadership in seen to be espousing the culture, and (b) if they can see, not only tangible benefits for themselves, but also that they are seen to be making a contribution to the overall organisational effectiveness. Participant D gave an interesting example of this when discussing a similar type cultural awareness programme within his organisation; “What we’ve seen with the safety cultural programme we’re running is that it transcends a whole load of other areas as well. The level of buy in that you get because we’ve engaged with them in the cultural programme, it challenges guys beliefs and spills across into efficiency, quality, a whole load of the other areas that you see people are suddenly taking a much bigger interest in and are willing to participate in”.

An organisation’s culture should have a central influence on strategy and effectiveness. Positive organisational culture can be a significant source of competitive advantage, and is nigh impossible to imitate or replicate as referenced in the literature but culture can only be used to influence effective management, strategy development and competitive advantage if it is recognised and understood. An organisation, similar to a brand or product, carries its own personality which is the public perception of the organisational culture. The personality, and
culture, often reflects the individual personality of the organisation’s leader and in the case of successful business organisations this can lead to significant commercial success and competitive advantage.

Handy (1993) notes that there is a growing literature on the culture of organizations, for it has come to be realised that the customs and traditions of a place are a powerful way of influencing behaviour and change. He also says that “strong pervasive cultures turn organisations into cohesive tribes with distinctly clannish feelings where the values and traditions of the tribe are reinforced by its private language, its catch-phrases and its tales of past heroes and dramas”. All participants, and B and D very strongly, empathise with this concept, with anecdotal stories of great personalities, characters and events that helped shape their respective organisations, while Logan et al (2008) also examines the concept of tribal culture and tribal leadership and makes the point that if they succeed, the tribe recognises them as leader, giving them discretionary effort, cult-like loyalty, and a track record of success.” Leadership, people and culture again inextricably linked.

**Participant C** takes it a step further, describing “*that lovely cycle of leadership and culture and reward and recognition, so all of those feed into it. Like any strategic objective you’re trying to drive, they’ll all go into it, yeah, definitely, and you’ve got the very interesting phenomenon there of people saying they want something, and people actually driving for it and rewarding it so you have to align all that together***.

It is that linkage and alignment of values, of those contained in Zheng’s model, together with emergent values, that is at the crux of this investigative study.

Organisation culture is conceptualised as an independent variable due to its established relationships with the rest of the capitals and the fact that organisation culture itself can be a dynamic source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1986).
4.3.4 Organisational Learning

Participant D delivered a most appropriate anecdote to highlight the importance of learning within the organisation relaying the story that one manager is complaining about the cost of training employees, and then they leave the organisation, whilst his managerial colleague responds “think of the cost of training all these people, how much it costs and they all depart, - and then think of the cost if we train none of them and they all stayed.”

Kamaluddin & Rahman, (2010) believe that when knowledge sharing is inculcated this will encourage the process of knowledge development in the organisation and will smoothen the intellectual capital planning or strategies in the organisation, a view shared by Participant C but who recognises it is not prevalent in Irish companies in this knowledge-economy, suggesting “but often people struggle with that and again there’s an indicator that I’d look for always, mentoring, do they have a mentoring programme, are graduates mentored, and mid-level management mentored, and even you might even see the CEO having a mentor outside of the organisation but that would be a good indicator of a knowledge centric organisation, when you see good rich programmes like that, talent development programmes, mentoring programmes, that’s the people bit you’d expect to see.”.

Simultaneously, strong intellectual capital will enhance firms performance, a view also very clearly expressed by Participant D – “Well I think what you’ve got to do is, you’ve got to match up teams of people and I think it’s through osmosis to a certain extent. You’ve got to match up youngsters with some of the longer term guys, you have and try and give them the different experiences that are to be had in different projects”. The emergent themes captured in these extracts is the intrinsic link between people, learning, knowledge, and organisational effectiveness.
4.4 Conclusion

Conclusive research answers questions of fact, necessary to determine a course of action (Zikmund, 2003, p110). This is not the purpose of investigative research, and was not the purpose of this research study. The results of this research study indicate that there is a clear link between Knowledge Management, Organisational Effectiveness and Competitive Advantage. Therefore, as could have been expected, this research agrees with the findings of Hansen et al (1999), and those of Grant (1996) who emphasises that it is the coordination of knowledge in a firm gives rise to efficiency that allows competitive advantages to be derived from the functioning of different firm activities.

All participants unanimously vouched that in their opinion KM is a clear source of CA but that they are unsure as to whether their respective organisations are/were capturing and managing this core asset as effectively as they could. This supports a similar finding revealed by Nunes et al (2005) who posed similar questions to a number of CEO’s in a similar type study and state that “Knowledge acquisition and embodiment was perceived as a crucial task by all interviewees. Curiously, they all agree that knowledge could be better managed and stored within the organisation and this could probably result in greater innovation and profitability.”

However the results also clearly indicate that not all business leaders and organisations are wholly conversant, or in agreement, with (a) what a dedicated KM system entails?; (b) what resources and level of investment is required to make it workable and efficient?; and (c) how it can benefit organisations in the short-term?

Participant A is unequivocal, again citing the economic downturn as a major obstacle for the knowledge economy to flourish – “Now we have the time we just don’t have the money, there is never a good time to do this because we have to take people out of the business and
you have to put money toward it. Do your values align with this? If they don’t, it’s going to be very difficult.

Knowledge is among the valuable resource to the firm that is protected and ways are sorted by the management on how to organize it and efficiently generate knowledge and capability (Nickerson & Zenger, 2004). How and what knowledge is imparted and integrated into the firm influences the competitive edge that results from use (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Grant, 1996).

This research study set out to investigate the theories contained in the Zheng et al model, and now concludes with grounded theories emerging from this research process. It is important to note that the Zheng et study (2010) was of a quantitative nature, and interesting to note that some of the findings of that study are not dissimilar to this, for example Zheng et al concluded that knowledge management was found to fully mediate organisational culture’s influence on organisational effectiveness, that organisational culture, structure and strategy have close interrelationships and that culture has a greater contribution to knowledge management than the other factors examined.

Ultimately the Zheng et al study findings indicate that knowledge management can influence organisational effectiveness when it is in alignment with organisational culture, structure, and strategy. Using qualitative methods this research study indicates that such an alignment will also generate competitive advantage. Both research methods have strengths and limitations, and a SWOT analysis on both could be conducted prior to further research. Considering the investigative nature of the study, and the depth and complexity of the research topic, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to build upon this study would undoubtedly add considerable value.
As shown in Fig 1, above is the Zheng et al model.

Below, Fig 8 is an adapted model, progressing the link through to competitive advantage.
Figure 9 below, is a further adapted model, illustrating the emergent themes from the grounded theory research process and progressing the link through to competitive advantage.
5.0 CONCLUSION

As stated in Chapter 1, research is, above all, a process of discovery. This entire research design is founded on that basis. Much of the recent research found in the literature on this topic of competitiveness advantage achieved through organisational effectiveness and knowledge management, is based on quantitative methods (Gold et al, 2001; Kamaluddin & Rahman, 2009; Zheng et al, 2010; Salleh & Ching, 2011; Agha et al, 2012; Tuan, 2013). By employing the qualitative methodology described in this study, the intention was to produce a body of work that is rich in material, relevant and insightful in the context of the research topic. It was not to design a specific KM system, nor to conclusively redefine the concept of OE. The ultimate objective was that it will produce substantial grounded theory that may act as a catalyst for future research in this area.

However, one of the limitations of qualitative research is the reliability and validity, and further research by quantitative methods, invoking numerical data and statistics could only complement the findings of this study.

In today’s challenging business environment, for many organisations it is the short-term view upon which management time and efforts are focussed and prioritised. It is reasonable to assume that organisations for which corporate or business strategy is based on the short-term view and current issues, even survival, then knowledge management or the implementation of such a dedicated system, will not feature very highly on their list of priorities. It may be a flawed strategy, lacking foresight and vision, but it is understandable in the context of business survival in recessionary times. It is particularly true of SME’s and business sectors that continue to decline or stagnate, for example, the construction, retail and property sectors.

For the more buoyant sectors such as pharmaceutical and ICT, populated to a large degree by multi-nationals and organisations with relatively healthy longer term prospects, KM is an
easier “sell” to company shareholders, executive boards and employees. Many such organisations already invest in knowledge based strategies and it is likely that this will continue and grow in the future as further and stronger evidence to prove the link between knowledge strategies and competitive strategies emerges.

This, in essence, is what this dissertation set out as its research objective. It does not produce definitive answers or quick-fix solutions, but building on past research into this concept provides a framework upon which further similar research can be conducted in the future. The investigative nature of this study and its findings is supported by Zikmund (2003,p110) who describes exploratory research as a useful preliminary step that helps ensure that a more rigorous, more conclusive study will not begin with an inadequate understanding of the nature of the management problem. I hope that this dissertation goes some way towards achieving that goal.

In conclusion, the common consensus was that the research question is indeed of significant importance to organisations striving to achieve and maintain competitive advantage. As very succinctly encapsulated by Participant B, “it is not a question as to whether ‘the cat needs to be belled’, it is more “how do we bell the cat’ that is the real issue”.

76
6.0 SELF-REFLECTION

"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984,p 38)

6.1 Introduction

The process by which this research study was conducted has opened up a vast and insightful understanding of the topic for me, the researcher. On embarking upon this study, which holds intrinsic interest and fascination for me, I discovered many new theories, concepts, and above all perceptions of what the research topic means both to myself, and to many vastly experienced business people I interviewed as an integral part of the process.

My personal and primary objective was to investigate the subject matter, to gain a greater and deeper insight into a topic that I believe is of paramount importance in today’s business world, one that possibly has not been adequately researched to date, and one that leaves itself open for much further and evolving research in the future. I chose the topic over other potential topics at the initial selection stage, after much deliberation, primarily because it is an area of management that I am genuinely interested in, one that I see as a potential growth area in business management in future years, and one that I believe may potentially present career opportunities for myself in the future, either in employment, consultancy, or academia.

According to Chohan (2010), “self-reflection and self-discovery are on-going and necessary processes”. This encapsulates my personal feelings when I embarked on the MBA Executive Leadership programme in September 2011. A qualified Civil Engineer by profession, a construction professional with over twenty years’ occupational experience, I had reached a point where I believed in order to maximise my inherent skills, knowledge and experience, I
needed to challenge myself to acquire new ones. Some people may call it a mid-life crisis! But as the national and global economy continued to decline, and with my industry sector practically decimated, I believed that in order to broaden my knowledge and skills base, and subsequently provide me with alternative career opportunities. I concluded that, with cognisance of the knowledge-based economy being the driver in economic recovery, that learning new skills and pursuing additional academic qualifications was the most appropriate route to take.

“Learning is your most important capability simply because it is the gateway to every other capability you might wish to develop” (Honey & Mumford, 2006)

6.2 Learning Style

The dissertation element of the MBA programme proved to be an onerous challenge. Although I had written a thesis in the past, the passage of time dims the memory and the fact that I had been away from formal academic learning for many years exacerbated the personal challenge in compiling a sustainable, coherent, and academic body of work.

As part of my engineering training and professional background, maintaining a reflective diary of sorts was not alien to me. This discipline was encouraged by my dissertation supervisor, and supported in Saunders et al (2012,p.13), particularly in relation to writing this self-reflective chapter, where capturing both the positive and negative insights acquired throughout the process are of particular relevance. To assist in being able to develop my research study and understand the process, on advice from my supervisor I engaged in keeping a reflective diary, where random notes of thoughts, reflections and insights were captured, not always, admittedly, in a structured or disciplined manner, but in a manner by
which I was able to transcribe to include in this self-reflection section. Learning styles have been defined as peoples’ consistent ways of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning (Claxton & Ralston, 1978).

It has long been known that different people have different ways of learning, a subject variously referred to as “cognitive style” or “learning style” (Strauss et al, 2011). In order to attempt to get a better understanding of my personal learning style I first needed to fully understand what I was endeavouring to learn. Self-reflection, discussed by Boud (1993, as cited in Dyke, 2006), emphasizes the value of learning from the experiences of others and sharing one’s own experiences. This was exactly how I was attempting to learn, to gain knowledge and insight, within the context of my research study.

David Kolb’s seminal work on experiential learning provides the framework by which I can attempt to understand my own personal style. In this theory, experiential learning is defined as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). The experiential learning model (ELM) (Fig. 10) devised by Kolb (1984) and its associated learning style takes an information processing approach to learning (O’Leary & Stewart, 2013).

Kolb's model works on two levels - a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience - (CE), Reflective Observation - (RO), Abstract Conceptualization - (AC), and Active Experimentation - (AE) and a four-type definition of learning styles, (each representing the combination of two preferred styles, rather like a two-by-two matrix of the four-stage cycle styles, as illustrated below), for which Kolb used the terms: Diverging (CE/RO), Assimilating (AC/RO), Converging (AC/AE), and Accommodating (CE/AE). Kolb’s four-stage model of learning from experience focuses on the polar extremes of concrete–abstract and active–
reflective dimensions of cognitive growth. The concrete–abstract dimension represents how one prefers to perceive the environment or grasp experiences in the world. The active–reflective dimension represents how one prefers to process incoming information and transform experience (Kolb, 1984).

**Fig. 10 - Experiential Learning Model**

Jennings (2012) expands that Kolb, based on his four stages of learning, developed four categories of learners: accommodators, divergers, assimilators, and convergers. According to Jennings;- *Accommodators* are “feeler-doers” who learn through gut reactions, hands-on experience, and feelings. Logic is not an accommodator’s forte. *Divergers* are capable of
viewing concrete information and situations from many different points of view. *Assimilators* are “thinkers-watchers” who can take a great deal of information, process it, and put it together into logical and organised format. *Convergers* want to know practical use for any ideas or theories presented to them.

In attempting to categorise my own learning style, I could relate to elements of all four styles in certain contexts. But, according to McCarthy (2010), the learner will generally have a preference for one particular style and, as their learning develops, that preference may change to a different style. Kolb also concluded that those who learn the best learn by using all four ways, and truly good learners learn by learning how to step beyond the learning style that they favour.

However, according to Jennings(2012), “*Assimilators* use logic and inductive reasoning to build new knowledge. These are the folks who can take information and organize it and need to be certain that there is sound logic behind new information”. This I would argue is my most prominent learning style, certainly within the context of this study whereby the value of my research, via the interview process, was to facilitate the emergence of grounded theory data by adopting an ‘Assimilator’ role to produce my research findings.

### 6.3 Personal Insights

At the outset, whilst having a clear vision of what I wished to explore, and a strategy and methodology as to how I was going conduct my investigation, I had little idea of what the research would uncover, how it would develop and evolve, and what meaning and relevance it would have to a number of the participants. “Conducting qualitative research requires considerable reflection on the researcher's part, and the ability to make a critical assessment
of informants comments. It involves debating the reasons for adopting a course of action, challenging ones’ own assumptions and recognising how decisions shape the research study (Carcary, 2011). One of the most interesting aspects emanating from the interview process was how the semi-structured, informal nature of the interviews allowed the participants to both open up, and allow themselves reflect upon the research topic. A process of discovery and enlightenment ensued for me, inspired by a process of what could be termed ‘self-awakening’ in the participants. There was a sense that, as the interviews gained momentum and got deeper into the heart of the topic, participants began questioning themselves perhaps, certainly pondering as to how the tentative hypotheses with which they were presented could have been, or could yet be, a source of real benefit for their organisations.

The feeling that the process was somehow influencing others to contemplate and deliberate upon their own views and interpretations of the research topic, which in turn led to self-examinations and disclosures that may not have been pre-determined or intended, provided a deep sense of satisfaction for me that the study was not only thought-provoking and relevant, but also extremely worthwhile as a research topic that may in turn influence even greater empirical research in the future. “Through this process of examination, understanding, insights, and discoveries are made to add value to the particular experience as well as to other prior experiences.” (Armstrong & Mahmud, 2008)

According to Saunders et al (2012, p555) reflection can occur in a number of ways…during an event, or after an activity has taken place. I found myself intuitively reflecting in this manner in the immediate aftermath of conducting interviews. Reflection means thinking about the conditions for what one is doing, and investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006), who also, along with Keso et al, (2009) discuss another method of reflection, known as reflexivity, which involves
examining personal reactions to what is being researched, the nature of the relationship with participants, and evaluating the way in which data is interpreted to construct knowledge. Given its interpretivist nature, reflexivity is now the defining feature of qualitative research and Bryman & Bell (2003, p529) compare it to ‘resembling having an on-going conversation with oneself about an experience whilst simultaneously living in the moment’. I can certainly empathise with these views and interpretations having experienced the process.

The interviews with participants was one of the more enjoyable parts of the dissertation process. In total I conducted nine interviews with a cross-section of senior business people, some retired, the others holding senior positions in their current organisations. This did not turn out to be the daunting task I had envisaged it would be, and certainly not the testing ordeal that some of my classmates anecdotally mentioned it proved for them.

Having a clear set of topical guidance notes framed, and sent by email to participants in advance of each interview certainly helped in this regard, helping to keep dialogue relatively on-topic and on track. I can honestly state that each and every interview provided its own unique insight for me personally, into how the various participants displayed their own unique perspective or ‘take’ on different parts of the research study. I believe that the semi-structured nature of the interviews was paramount in soliciting and eliciting the rich vein of material acquired, enabling me to follow the entire cycle as referred to in Kolb’s learning style model, where the post-interview feeling led me to engage in abstract conceptualisation (thinking) about what had taken place. “An individual’s journey in life is interwoven with invaluable learning experiences. The internal dialogue that takes place before, during, and after the experiences influences the perceptive filters, interpretive paradigms and the meanings that are abstracted from conversations and events”. (Chohan, 2010)
I also believe that the fact that all bar one of the participants were known personally to me, to varying degrees of familiarity, was highly significant in facilitating a congenial, yet professional and constructive dialogue. It is worthwhile noting, although difficult to lucidly express, that tone of voice, body language, banter, and personal mannerisms of participants contributed greatly to the vibrancy and dynamic of the interviews, and it is impossible for the written transcripts to adequately illustrate this facet, but it was certainly an integral aspect of the interview methodology. Reflexivity is the concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2006) and this concept became clear to me as I progressed the interview process.

6.4 Personal Learning

Ultimately, the process was a learning experience for me. My primary objective was to complete my dissertation, the final deliverable in my MBA programme. People strive to achieve a normal work/life balance as they progress through life, family, financial and other commitments add inevitable additional stress to that equation as we move through life. The onerous demands of a part-time MBA course of study over a 24 month period added to that mix greatly increases personal sacrifice and burden, and further compromises life balance.

Obviously the academic programme was undertaken with a clear objectives and questions in mind: (a) will I possess the wherewithal to complete such an onerous academic challenge having been away from formal learning for so long?; (b) will I benefit from the experience and the associated academic qualification?; (c) will I be able to successfully complete the programme without putting undue strain on other aspects of my life?

Jennings (2012) contends that for questions such as these, the “what does this mean for me?” learners can then be taken in a direction to which they may have some initial resistance.
From a personal perspective, the entire dissertation process resembled a journey where the starting point and ultimate destination were clearly established at the outset, but the route deviated significantly from the expected course, and became increasingly non-linear as the journey progressed through the various stages. Kolb’s learning cycle makes sense now, but did not always. This fragmented progression often led to a sense of frustration and disillusionment, my exasperation fuelled by a sense that progress was not commensurate with personal input and time expended, and that the quality of the work being produced was disproportionate to both my efforts and expectations. A constant and recurring cause of personal concern and disenchantment that seemed ever-present was that as increasingly more material was acquired through both primary and secondary research, the challenge as to how to incorporate all the most appropriate and relevant material into a cogent, logical and coherent body of work became increasingly onerous. Feelings of enthusiasm and fulfilment on having completed another interview, or having found in the literature a particularly succinct and applicable piece of research, often quickly dissipated once the task of trying to integrate the unearthed material into the relevant section whilst maintaining a lucid flow became increasingly arduous.

The review of existing literature on my research topic, which effectively underpins the entire research study, proved extremely challenging. At the outset I mistakenly believed that this would be a neat, compartmentalised section to work through to completion. I was quickly to discover that the literature review was anything but an iterative process. The literature review of the central themes of my research topic was initially relatively uncomplicated as I had a clear vision and strategy of what I wished to research and review, and how these primary themes interlinked. However, once the emergent themes from the interviews became clear, the literature review became disjointed and confusing, as endeavouring to review the existing literature on the emergent themes, whilst integrating and making it relevant in the context of
my research topic, led to an unsystematic and often disorganised narrative. My efforts to contextualise the existing literature within the framework and structure of the dissertation became ever more onerous and attempts to streamline into a coherent and fluid text became chaotic. A recurring issue was that as I reviewed a certain piece of literature with a purpose in mind, I frequently found myself being drawn into other areas of research, usually relevant to my topic, but not what I had intended. So, as opposed to developing a better understanding, or getting a deeper insight, of a particular element of my research, I found myself now focussing on an area I had not set out to review, but felt almost compelled to do so. Whilst this straying off topic was often beneficial in terms of my learning experience in the context of my research topic, it spiralled into a time-consuming exercise, when time was fast becoming a scarce resource. Initially I believed that it was down to indiscipline, poor time-management, and poor research skills on my part. However, on discussing this with my dissertation supervisor and further reviewing literature on research skills, I discovered that this was a normal chain of events in the literature review process. Whilst this appeased me to an extent in that the time spent was not in vain, it obviously did not give me back my time. A valuable lesson learned if I was to undertake a similar task in the future.

A significant dilemma that occurred whilst undertaking my dissertation involved the number of participant interviews conducted. It is absolutely true to state that whilst some interviews provided richer material than others, all bar none provided snippets of extremely interesting and appropriate material that could have been used. The difficulty I experienced in this regard was which interviews to select to transcribe verbatim, whilst having to sideline others which provided noteworthy material in their own right. Driving home from interviews I felt myself thinking about what had just occurred, what information I had gleaned, what sense I could make of the emergent theories. All the while I was following Kolb’s learning cycle, feeling, watching, analysing, thinking, doing. A method I adopted, even whilst driving and listening
to the recordings was that, as insights emerged for me, I converted mental notes and reflections as voice memos on my Smart Phone, thereby saved for subsequent coding and analysis later. I found this a particularly useful method of reflection.

As the main body of the work began to take shape I found myself concentrating more on KM than OE, which was not necessarily the intention at the outset. This was partly due to the quality of secondary research material available that fed into my principal objective, and partly due to the fact that the qualitative interview process, and in particular participants responses, focussed more on the KM element and gave heavier weighting to this element. As I progressed through writing up the various sections it became increasingly obvious that the main emphasis of my investigative study centred on how KM influenced CA, in a way bypassing OE as a central theme, or rendering it as merely a by-product in the whole process. This in turn led me to several times consider dropping the OE element of the topic completely as it seemed to be merely padding the dissertation to little effect. However, on applying rigorous reflection, I reasoned in my own mind that this was primarily due to the fact that OE is a less understood concept in the business world, and that there has been less empirical research carried out on the subject in contrast to KM. My deduction would appear to be supported in the literature by Cameron & Whetton (1981), Robertson et al (2002), Oghojafor (2012),and Liebowitz (2006). I remained steadfast in my belief that KM influences OE, and that OE itself is an area requiring much greater understanding and definition, and on that basis I concluded that it should remain in my study as it is an area worthy of further and deeper research in the future.

Admittedly, there were several occasions throughout the process when elements of self-doubt and mental blocks stunted my progress, leading to procrastination and disillusionment on my part. Interestingly, these became more frequent and pronounced as more of the work was completed and as the finishing line came into view. Questioning myself as to whether I was
hitting the right notes within the main sections of the dissertation became an almost daily self-examination, and I felt I expended too much valuable time engaging in self-retrospection, producing feelings of ‘paralysis by analysis’ almost, to the detriment of getting words on paper. There were periods where it seemed I was becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, particularly in relation to the vast wealth of material uncovered by both primary and secondary research, and not focussing enough on the specific detail and content I was endeavouring to assimilate and articulate. Maintaining focus and attention on the nucleus of the dissertation was a constant challenge, maintaining motivation and impetus was frequently equally challenging, particularly at times when mental fatigue took hold.

6.5 Conclusion

Ultimately, it was a huge learning experience for me. I developed new cognitive skills, learning skills, and critical skills, which I will be able to apply to help achieve personal and professional goals in the future. I have also acquired a far deeper understanding into how a research process works, and that I believe is something one cannot learn without living the experience. The learning process I have experienced is supported by Nonaka (1994) who argues that the generation and accumulation of tacit knowledge is determined by the “variety” of an individual’s experiences and the individual’s commitment and involvement in the “context” of the situation.

My personal background and training in engineering, where scientific and mathematical solutions are sought for technical issues may have initially influenced me towards a quantitative methodology, in order to produce numerical data to support my findings. It may also have proved an easier method in terms of data collection, analysis and write-up.

On reflection, I do not believe a quantitative research could have produced such rich, varied and informative results, and that provides a sense of deep satisfaction for me that I chose not
only the most appropriate research method, but also chose well when selecting participants to engage with my research.

Most enlighteningly, emanating from this process not only have I acquired knowledge and understanding, I have learned to understand how I have acquired knowledge and understanding. According to Strong et al (2008), knowledge is only useful for those who can effectively learn, and learning is only effective if useful knowledge is available.
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8.0 APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix 1 - Tentative Hypotheses for Interview Participants

8.2 Appendix 2 - Informed Consent Form
8.1 - Appendix 1 – Tentative Hypotheses as Guidance Document for Interviewees

“As Ireland moves further into the knowledge economy, how organisations effectively manage knowledge will be of great importance in developing a competitive advantage”

(Gallagher, 2011)

The above quotation neatly summarises the hypothesis that I intend to explore. The following statements are merely my own thoughts on the subject matter, they are not proven, nor meant to be definitive, and serve only as a guide to our interview in the hope that other concepts or theories will emerge.

H1- Knowledge is the preserve of people, not organisations.

H2- Knowledge sharing within an organisation is a major challenge for management.

H3- Harnessing organisational knowledge is a critical success factor for an organisation.

H4- Organisations that employ dedicated KM systems will improve operational performance and organisational effectiveness.

H5- Management and retention of organisational knowledge will have a positive impact on organisational effectiveness.

H6- Organisations differ in their overall concept of “effectiveness”.

H7- Organisations differ in metrics applied to competitive advantage.

H8- Effective leadership will have a positive impact on organisational effectiveness.
H9- Effective people management will have a positive impact on organisational effectiveness.

H10- Organisational structure, culture and strategy has a positive impact on effectiveness.

H11- Competitive Advantage is the ultimate goal of an organisation.

H12- Organisational knowledge and core competences are central concepts for competitive strategy.

H13- No one element alone can generate competitive advantage.

H14 -Collective organisational effectiveness will be more influential than individual capabilities in a competitive marketplace.

H15 -There is an intrinsic link between effective Knowledge Management, Organisational Effectiveness and Competitive Advantage.
8.2 – Appendix 2 – Informed Consent Form

DUBLIN BUSINESS SCHOOL

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Name: Bernard Finn

Programme: MBA Exec. (Master’s Degree in Business Administration and Executive Leadership)

Research Study: “An Investigation into how dedicated Knowledge Management can improve Organisational Effectiveness and generate sustained Competitive Advantage”

Dear …………….,

I am a post-graduate student at Dublin Business School. My contact information and that of the academic supervisor who is presiding over my work is provided below.

I am exploring the themes of Knowledge Management, Organisational Effectiveness, and Competitive Advantage, and the intrinsic link between these elements within an organisational context. I am interested in learning your views, opinions, interpretations and outlooks on the topic, based on your real-life individual and organisational experiences. My intention is to explore and expand existing theories and conceptual knowledge on the topic based on the collation of information acquired by means of a qualitative research process.

I am therefore asking if you would agree to participate in my research study by answering a series of questions, by means of a semi-formal interview. I advise you that, subject to your consent, the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. The interview period will be a minimum of 60 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes, at a date, time, and venue, suitable to your availability and convenience.

It is possible that you may also benefit from participation in this research, as sometimes when we reflect back on previous experiences or collect our thoughts on a topic we can learn or understand events in a new way. If you feel uncomfortable or concerned about this please let me know and we can either not continue with the interview or reschedule at a time that is more appropriate.

Please understand that you do not have to participate in this research, and that you can terminate your participation at any time during the course of the research. Also feel free to skip any particular question and move on the next one at any time during the research.
In addition, you have the right to ask me to not include any particularly specific or sensitive information you provided in my research.

This research is confidential and no individuals or organisations will be identified without their written consent. Any information that could reveal your identity or that of your organisation will be excluded from any future papers or research reports that are written based on this research. Any surveys, tapes or recordings will be destroyed at the end of this project. You will not receive any payment or financial inducement for participation in this research. You may, on request, be a recipient of a copy of the completed study. This research has been approved by Dublin Business School.

If you have any questions about the ethical process or substance of the research, please feel free to contact me, or my supervisor, for clarification.

Research Student: Bernard Finn  Tel:.......................

Academic Supervisor: Joyce Byrne-Walsh  Tel: ......................

Participant:

*I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above, and the possible risks associated with it. I hereby agree to participate in this research study. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.*

________________________________  ______________________
Printed Name of Participant  Date and Time

________________________________
Title / Position / Occupation of Participant  Venue

________________________________
Signature of Participant  Signature of Researcher

110