

Management System Evolution Through Organizational Learning: Developing a Dynamic Capability Framework

Pedram Kazemi^{1*}

1. Department of Technology Management, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to develop a dynamic capability framework explaining how organizational learning drives the evolution of management systems in contemporary organizations. This qualitative study was conducted using an inductive exploratory design. The participants included 24 senior managers, middle managers, organizational development specialists, learning managers, and management consultants working in public and private organizations in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on direct experience with organizational change, learning systems, process redesign, and managerial transformation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the twenty-first interview, followed by three confirmatory interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review, repeated coding, and constant comparison. The analysis identified five main categories explaining management system evolution through organizational learning: strategic sensing through collective learning, knowledge articulation and codification, ambidextrous learning between exploration and exploitation, leadership-enabled learning culture, and resource reconfiguration through institutionalized learning routines. The findings showed that management systems evolve when organizations convert dispersed experience into shared interpretation, transform learning into repeatable routines, and use these routines to reconfigure structures, processes, technologies, and decision-making mechanisms. Organizational learning acted as the generative mechanism through which dynamic capabilities were formed, renewed, and embedded. The study concludes that management system evolution is not merely the outcome of technological modernization or structural redesign; rather, it is a dynamic learning-based process through which organizations sense environmental change, interpret internal and external knowledge, seize improvement opportunities, and reconfigure managerial routines. The proposed framework contributes to dynamic capability theory by showing how learning mechanisms operate as microfoundations of management system renewal.

Keywords: organizational learning; dynamic capabilities; management system evolution; qualitative research; organizational renewal; learning routines; Tehran.

✉ *CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S EMAIL

pedram.kazemi.tech@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Management systems are no longer viewed as static administrative arrangements designed only to coordinate tasks, control performance, and allocate authority. In contemporary organizations, management systems increasingly function as adaptive architectures through which organizations interpret environmental change, integrate knowledge, redesign processes, and renew their resource base. The acceleration of technological disruption, digital transformation, market uncertainty, institutional complexity, and workforce knowledge intensity has made traditional bureaucratic and efficiency-centered models insufficient for organizations that must continuously adapt. Under these conditions, the evolution of management systems depends not only on formal restructuring but also on the organization's capacity to learn, unlearn, recombine knowledge, and transform managerial routines into dynamic capabilities. The dynamic capabilities perspective defines such capabilities as



the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences in response to rapidly changing environments (Teece et al., 1997).

The concept of dynamic capabilities emerged as a response to the limitations of static resource-based explanations of competitive advantage. While resources may explain differences between firms at a given point in time, they do not fully explain how organizations sustain adaptation when technologies, markets, and institutional conditions change. Dynamic capabilities theory therefore shifts attention from resource possession to resource renewal, emphasizing how organizations sense opportunities and threats, seize strategic possibilities, and reconfigure assets and routines (Teece, 2007). Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) further argue that dynamic capabilities are identifiable organizational processes such as strategic decision-making, product development, alliance formation, and knowledge integration. From this perspective, management system evolution can be understood as a capability-building process through which organizations modify how they plan, decide, coordinate, learn, monitor, and innovate.

Organizational learning provides the theoretical bridge between management system evolution and dynamic capability formation. Organizational learning refers to processes through which organizations acquire, interpret, distribute, store, and use knowledge to change behavior, routines, and strategic assumptions. Argyris and Schön's theory of organizational learning distinguished between learning that corrects errors within existing rules and deeper forms of learning that question the governing assumptions behind action. This distinction is central to management system evolution because many organizations improve procedures without transforming the deeper managerial logic that produces rigidity. A management system may become more efficient while remaining fundamentally incapable of adaptation if learning remains limited to procedural correction. Genuine evolution requires double-loop learning, in which organizations examine the values, assumptions, and power structures embedded in their management routines.

Crossan, Lane, and White's organizational learning framework further clarifies how learning moves across levels. Their 4I model conceptualizes organizational learning as a dynamic process involving intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing, linking individual insights to organizational routines (Crossan et al., 1999). This multilevel understanding is particularly useful for explaining management system evolution because managerial transformation rarely begins as a fully designed system. Instead, it often emerges from dispersed experiments, informal problem-solving, local innovations, and collective interpretation. When individual and group learning become institutionalized in policies, structures, dashboards, workflows, and decision rules, they begin to reshape the management system itself.

The relationship between organizational learning and dynamic capabilities has been explicitly developed by Zollo and Winter (2002), who argue that dynamic capabilities evolve through experience accumulation, knowledge articulation, and knowledge codification. Their contribution is especially relevant to the present study because it explains how learning becomes routinized without becoming rigid. Experience accumulation provides raw material for learning; knowledge articulation makes implicit lessons discussable; and codification embeds learning into tools, procedures, models, and routines. Thus, the evolution of management systems depends on whether organizations can convert fragmented learning episodes into stable but revisable capability structures. This conversion process is central to the proposed framework of the present article.

A major challenge in this process is the tension between exploration and exploitation. March (1991) argued that organizations must balance exploration of new possibilities with exploitation of existing competencies,

although both compete for scarce attention and resources. Management systems traditionally prioritize exploitation through budgeting, standardization, hierarchy, and performance control. However, adaptive organizations must also create space for exploration through experimentation, learning forums, flexible project structures, and tolerance for intelligent failure. Management system evolution therefore requires ambidextrous learning: the capacity to preserve operational reliability while simultaneously enabling discovery, innovation, and renewal.

Absorptive capacity is another important concept in explaining how learning contributes to management system evolution. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) define absorptive capacity as the ability to recognize the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it commercially. In management system transformation, absorptive capacity determines whether organizations can learn from external sources such as competitors, consultants, digital platforms, professional communities, regulatory shifts, and customer feedback. However, external knowledge does not automatically improve management systems. It must be interpreted through internal experience, translated into organizational language, and aligned with existing or emerging routines. Therefore, absorptive capacity operates as a learning capability that supports sensing and seizing within the dynamic capability framework.

Knowledge creation theory also helps explain how organizational learning becomes embedded in management systems. Nonaka's theory of organizational knowledge creation emphasizes the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge and shows how knowledge is created through socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. In management system evolution, tacit managerial experience must be externalized into concepts, models, and procedures before it can be shared and institutionalized. Conversely, explicit systems such as strategic plans, competency frameworks, performance indicators, and process maps must be internalized by organizational members before they can guide practice. This reciprocal movement between tacit and explicit knowledge helps explain why management system reform often fails when it remains limited to formal documentation and does not transform lived managerial behavior.

The evolution of management systems also requires a cultural and leadership context that supports learning. Learning-oriented organizations encourage reflection, knowledge sharing, psychological safety, experimentation, and cross-functional dialogue. Without such a context, employees may conceal errors, managers may defend existing routines, and organizational members may comply with new procedures without internalizing their logic. Leadership is therefore not simply an authority function; it is a learning-enabling capability. Leaders shape whether organizations interpret disruption defensively or generatively, whether failure is treated as blame or information, and whether knowledge circulates vertically and horizontally. In this sense, leadership practices constitute important microfoundations of dynamic capabilities.

Despite extensive theoretical development in organizational learning and dynamic capabilities, the specific process by which learning drives the evolution of management systems remains underexplored, especially in qualitative research. Much of the literature treats dynamic capabilities as strategic outcomes or high-level organizational attributes, while less attention is given to the everyday learning mechanisms through which management routines are questioned, redesigned, stabilized, and renewed. Similarly, studies of organizational learning often explain knowledge processes without fully showing how these processes become embedded in management systems. This creates a theoretical gap at the intersection of learning, capability formation, and management system evolution.

This gap is particularly relevant in emerging and transitional organizational contexts, where firms and public organizations are often under pressure to modernize management practices while facing institutional constraints, resource limitations, bureaucratic legacies, and digital transformation demands. Tehran provides a meaningful empirical context for studying this issue because organizations in the city operate within complex economic, technological, and institutional environments that require adaptation but often retain hierarchical and procedure-driven management traditions. Understanding how managers and organizational development specialists interpret learning-based transformation in such a context can enrich dynamic capability theory and offer practical insights for management system renewal.

Accordingly, the present study develops a qualitative framework explaining how organizational learning contributes to management system evolution through dynamic capability formation. The study focuses on the lived experiences and interpretations of managers, learning specialists, and organizational development experts in Tehran-based organizations. It seeks to identify the learning mechanisms, leadership practices, knowledge routines, and reconfiguration processes through which organizations move from static management systems toward adaptive and capability-based management architectures. Therefore, the aim of this study was to develop a dynamic capability framework explaining how organizational learning drives the evolution of management systems.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to develop a framework of management system evolution through organizational learning and dynamic capability formation. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how managers and organizational specialists interpret, experience, and enact learning-based transformation in management systems. The research design was inductive and theory-building in orientation, drawing on principles of qualitative rigor in organizational research. The use of an inductive design was consistent with the Gioia methodology, which emphasizes systematic movement from participant-centered first-order concepts to researcher-centered theoretical categories in the development of new organizational concepts (Gioia et al., 2013).

The participants included 24 individuals working in organizations located in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they possessed direct knowledge of organizational learning, management system redesign, organizational development, strategic transformation, digitalization, or capability development. The final sample included 8 senior managers, 6 middle managers, 5 organizational development and human resource development specialists, 3 learning or knowledge-management managers, and 2 management consultants. Inclusion criteria were having at least five years of managerial or organizational development experience, direct involvement in at least one organizational change or learning initiative, and willingness to participate in a recorded interview. Participants who lacked direct experience with management system transformation or who were unable to provide detailed accounts of organizational learning processes were excluded. Theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new categories emerged; three additional interviews were conducted to confirm and refine the emerging framework.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed the researcher to explore predetermined theoretical domains while also giving participants freedom to

describe their experiences, examples, and interpretations in depth. The interview guide included questions about organizational learning practices, managerial routines, change experiences, knowledge sharing, strategic sensing, decision-making processes, leadership support for learning, barriers to adaptation, and examples of management system renewal. Example questions included: “How does your organization learn from environmental changes?”, “Can you describe a situation in which learning led to a change in management routines?”, “What mechanisms help your organization transform experience into formal processes?”, and “How do leaders influence the organization’s ability to adapt its management system?”

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were prepared immediately after each interview to capture contextual observations, emerging interpretations, and analytical reflections. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, allowing early codes and categories to inform subsequent interviews. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Ethical principles were observed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, anonymizing participant identities, and allowing participants to withdraw at any stage.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it provides a flexible and systematic method for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, grouping similar codes, developing subthemes, constructing main categories, and refining the relationships among categories. NVivo was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare participant groups, retrieve coded segments, and support constant comparison across cases.

The coding process began with open coding of meaningful statements related to learning, adaptation, routines, leadership, knowledge use, and management system change. These initial codes were then grouped into second-order themes such as environmental interpretation, experiential learning, codification of lessons, learning forums, cross-functional coordination, strategic experimentation, capability renewal, and structural reconfiguration. Finally, the second-order themes were integrated into five main categories that formed the dynamic capability framework. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking with selected participants, peer review of the coding structure, use of an audit trail, and comparison of emerging categories with existing literature. The evaluation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability followed qualitative trustworthiness criteria associated with Lincoln and Guba’s naturalistic inquiry framework.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the study included 24 professionals from Tehran-based organizations. Fourteen participants were male and ten were female. The age range of participants was 34 to 58 years, with most participants between 40 and 49 years of age. In terms of organizational position, 8 participants were senior managers, 6 were middle managers, 5 were organizational development or human resource development specialists, 3 were learning or knowledge-management managers, and 2 were management consultants. Regarding work experience, 5 participants had 5–10 years of experience, 9 had 11–15 years, 7 had 16–20 years, and 3 had more than 20 years. The participants came from service, manufacturing, technology,

finance, and public-sector organizations. This diversity allowed the study to capture different forms of management system evolution across organizational contexts.

The first main category was **strategic sensing through collective learning**. Participants described management system evolution as beginning when organizations became capable of collectively interpreting environmental change rather than merely reacting to operational problems. This category included codes such as environmental scanning, customer feedback interpretation, competitor observation, digital trend monitoring, regulatory awareness, and cross-level dialogue. Participants emphasized that learning was not limited to training programs; rather, it involved repeated conversations through which managers and employees made sense of weak signals and converted them into strategic concerns. One senior manager stated, “Before, we waited until a problem became a crisis. Now, our management meetings start with what we have learned from customers, technology, and competitors.” Another participant explained, “The real change happened when information from the market was no longer kept in sales reports but became part of strategic discussion.” These findings indicate that strategic sensing operates as a learning-based dynamic capability when organizations create routines for noticing, discussing, and interpreting environmental change.

The second main category was **knowledge articulation and codification into adaptive routines**. Participants repeatedly noted that organizational learning affected management systems only when experience was transformed into explicit routines, tools, and procedures. Informal lessons, personal expertise, and project experiences often remained isolated unless they were articulated in meetings, after-action reviews, knowledge repositories, training materials, process maps, or revised performance indicators. One organizational development specialist said, “We had many experienced people, but the organization did not learn from them until we forced teams to document why decisions succeeded or failed.” Another participant stated, “A lesson is not organizational learning until it changes a checklist, a process, or a decision rule.” This category shows that management system evolution depends on the conversion of tacit knowledge into codified routines. However, participants also warned that codification could create rigidity if routines were not periodically reviewed. Therefore, adaptive routines were described as documented but revisable, stable enough to guide action but flexible enough to change when new learning emerged.

The third main category was **ambidextrous learning between exploitation and exploration**. Participants described a persistent tension between improving existing management routines and experimenting with new approaches. In many organizations, performance control systems rewarded efficiency, compliance, and short-term results, while discouraging experimentation and reflection. However, organizations that successfully evolved their management systems created parallel spaces for both exploitation and exploration. Exploitative learning appeared in process improvement, standardization, and operational problem-solving, whereas exploratory learning appeared in pilot projects, innovation teams, digital initiatives, and cross-functional experiments. A middle manager explained, “The organization wanted innovation, but all indicators measured routine efficiency. We learned that without changing the management system, innovation remains only a slogan.” Another participant noted, “Small experiments helped us change the system without threatening the whole organization.” These findings suggest that management system evolution requires balancing discipline and discovery. Dynamic capability formation occurs when organizations use exploitation to stabilize effective routines and exploration to generate new managerial possibilities.

The fourth main category was **leadership-enabled learning culture**. Participants consistently emphasized that leadership behavior determined whether learning became an organizational capability or remained an individual activity. Leaders influenced learning by legitimizing questioning, encouraging knowledge sharing, reducing fear of error, allocating time for reflection, and connecting learning to strategic priorities. In rigid organizations, participants reported that employees avoided sharing mistakes because mistakes were interpreted as incompetence. In more adaptive organizations, errors were treated as signals for system improvement. One participant said, “When managers ask ‘who is guilty?’ learning stops. When they ask ‘what did the system teach us?’ people start to speak.” Another senior manager explained, “Our role changed from giving instructions to creating conditions where teams could interpret problems together.” This category shows that learning culture is not a soft or secondary factor; it is a core microfoundation of dynamic capabilities. Without leadership support, sensing, knowledge articulation, experimentation, and reconfiguration remain fragmented and politically risky.

The fifth main category was **resource reconfiguration through institutionalized learning routines**. Participants described the final stage of management system evolution as the capacity to redesign structures, roles, processes, technologies, and performance mechanisms based on accumulated learning. This category included codes such as process redesign, decentralization of decision-making, digital workflow integration, revision of key performance indicators, creation of cross-functional teams, and renewal of managerial roles. One consultant stated, “A management system evolves when learning changes who decides, how information moves, and what the organization rewards.” Another participant noted, “After several learning cycles, we changed the structure because the old hierarchy could not support the speed of decisions we needed.” These findings indicate that learning becomes a dynamic capability when it leads to resource reconfiguration. The organization does not simply learn what happened; it changes its operating architecture so that future action becomes more adaptive.

Overall, the findings support a dynamic capability framework in which organizational learning drives management system evolution through five interconnected mechanisms. First, collective learning enables strategic sensing by helping organizations interpret external and internal signals. Second, knowledge articulation and codification convert experience into adaptive routines. Third, ambidextrous learning balances exploitation and exploration. Fourth, leadership-enabled learning culture creates the psychological and structural conditions for knowledge sharing and experimentation. Fifth, institutionalized learning routines enable resource reconfiguration. Together, these categories show that management system evolution is a recursive process: organizations learn from experience, transform learning into routines, use routines to reconfigure management systems, and then generate new experiences that restart the learning cycle.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to develop a dynamic capability framework explaining how organizational learning drives management system evolution. The findings identified five main categories: strategic sensing through collective learning, knowledge articulation and codification, ambidextrous learning, leadership-enabled learning culture, and resource reconfiguration through institutionalized learning routines. These categories suggest that management systems evolve not simply through structural reform or technological adoption but through learning mechanisms that enable organizations to sense change, interpret knowledge, revise routines, and reconfigure resources. This finding is consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which argues that

organizations sustain adaptation by integrating, building, and reconfiguring competences in changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). The present study extends this perspective by showing that organizational learning is not merely an antecedent of dynamic capabilities; it is the internal generative process through which dynamic capabilities are produced.

The first finding showed that strategic sensing emerges through collective learning. Participants emphasized that management system evolution begins when organizations create routines for interpreting environmental signals collectively. This aligns with Teece's view that sensing involves scanning, learning, and interpretive activity, rather than passive information collection (Teece, 2007). The finding also supports Cohen and Levinthal's concept of absorptive capacity, which explains that organizations need prior related knowledge to recognize and apply new knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). In the present study, organizations were more adaptive when they transformed dispersed information from customers, competitors, technologies, and regulations into shared strategic interpretation. This suggests that sensing is socially constructed through dialogue, not simply produced by data systems. Management systems therefore evolve when information flows are redesigned to support interpretation across organizational levels.

The second finding concerned knowledge articulation and codification into adaptive routines. Participants stated that individual experience did not become organizational learning until it was articulated, documented, and embedded in routines. This finding strongly supports Zollo and Winter's argument that dynamic capabilities evolve through experience accumulation, knowledge articulation, and knowledge codification (Zollo & Winter, 2002). The finding also aligns with Crossan et al.'s 4I framework, in which learning moves from individual intuition to organizational institutionalization (Crossan et al., 1999). However, the present study adds that codification must remain adaptive. Participants distinguished between documentation that supports learning and documentation that produces bureaucracy. This distinction is important because management systems may become rigid when codified routines are treated as final rules rather than revisable learning artifacts. Therefore, the evolutionary quality of management systems depends on whether routines are periodically questioned and renewed.

The third finding showed that management system evolution requires ambidextrous learning between exploitation and exploration. Participants described how traditional performance systems often privilege efficiency, compliance, and short-term control, thereby limiting experimentation. This finding is consistent with March's distinction between exploitation of existing knowledge and exploration of new possibilities (March, 1991). The study contributes to this literature by showing that ambidextrous learning is not only a strategic challenge but also a management system design challenge. Organizations cannot demand innovation while measuring only routine efficiency. They must design management systems that simultaneously support operational discipline and experimental learning. This requires separate but connected routines for continuous improvement, pilot testing, innovation review, and scaling of successful experiments. In this sense, ambidexterity is embedded in the architecture of management systems.

The fourth finding emphasized leadership-enabled learning culture as a microfoundation of dynamic capabilities. Participants repeatedly noted that leadership behavior shaped whether employees shared knowledge, reported errors, challenged assumptions, and engaged in experimentation. This finding is consistent with organizational learning theory, especially Argyris and Schön's distinction between defensive routines and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). When leaders respond to problems through blame, organizational

members conceal errors and learning becomes superficial. When leaders frame errors as information for system improvement, deeper learning becomes possible. The present study shows that leadership contributes to management system evolution by creating interpretive safety and strategic direction for learning. Leadership is therefore not external to dynamic capabilities; it is one of the conditions that allows learning routines to operate.

The fifth finding showed that learning becomes a dynamic capability when it leads to resource reconfiguration. Participants described management system evolution as visible in changes to structure, authority, workflows, performance indicators, digital tools, and coordination mechanisms. This finding supports Eisenhardt and Martin's view that dynamic capabilities are concrete organizational processes that reconfigure resources, rather than abstract strategic intentions (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). It also aligns with Teece's emphasis on reconfiguration as a central dimension of dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007). The present study adds that reconfiguration is often preceded by repeated learning cycles. Organizations do not immediately redesign their management systems after one insight; rather, they accumulate evidence, articulate lessons, test alternatives, and eventually institutionalize new arrangements. Thus, resource reconfiguration is the visible outcome of deeper learning processes.

The proposed framework contributes to theory in three ways. First, it integrates organizational learning theory and dynamic capability theory by showing how learning processes become capability mechanisms. While dynamic capabilities theory explains why organizations need sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring, organizational learning theory explains how these capabilities are formed through interpretation, articulation, codification, and institutionalization. Second, the framework reframes management system evolution as a recursive learning process. Management systems are not transformed once; they evolve through cycles of experience, interpretation, routine revision, and structural reconfiguration. Third, the study highlights the role of leadership and culture as enabling conditions for learning-based capability development. Without psychological safety, reflection, and cross-functional dialogue, organizations may possess formal learning systems but fail to generate adaptive capabilities.

The findings also have practical implications for organizations seeking to renew their management systems. Managers should treat learning mechanisms as strategic infrastructure rather than peripheral human resource activities. Training alone is insufficient unless learning is connected to decision-making, performance management, process redesign, and strategic planning. Organizations should establish systematic routines for after-action reviews, cross-functional learning meetings, environmental scanning, knowledge codification, and experimental project evaluation. These routines should be linked to mechanisms for revising structures, policies, and indicators. Otherwise, learning remains symbolic and does not alter the management system.

Furthermore, the study suggests that organizations should redesign performance systems to support both exploitation and exploration. If all indicators reward short-term efficiency, managers will avoid experimentation even when strategic discourse promotes innovation. Conversely, if experimentation is not connected to operational discipline, organizations may generate ideas without institutionalizing them. Effective management system evolution therefore requires balanced metrics that value process reliability, learning quality, innovation attempts, knowledge sharing, and adaptive outcomes. This balance allows organizations to maintain current performance while developing future capabilities.

The Tehran context also enriches the interpretation of the results. Participants described organizations operating under environmental uncertainty, bureaucratic traditions, digital transformation pressures, and resource

constraints. These conditions make learning-based capability development particularly important. In such contexts, management system evolution cannot rely only on imported models or formal restructuring. Organizations must develop internal learning routines that translate external knowledge into contextually meaningful practices. This finding is relevant to many emerging-economy organizations that face pressure to modernize while operating within institutional constraints.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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