

Effects of Internal Marketing and Its Components on Organisational Level Customer Orientation: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

A customer orientation which is considered the most important aspect of market orientation has been found to be a prerequisite to superior organizational performance hence developing a customer orientation is key to ensuring long-term performance. Internal marketing has been established in literature as a prerequisite to developing a customer orientation in the organization. Previous studies have also provided empirical evidence of an existing relationship between internal marketing and market orientation. Therefore, drawing from the works of Gounaris (2006) and Lings and Greenley (2005) who conceptualized internal marketing as internal market orientation; and Dawes (2000), and using data obtained from the banking and insurance industries, the study aimed to examine the relationship between the dimensions of internal market orientation and customer orientation. It was found that all dimensions of internal market orientation had positive relationships with customer orientation. Information dissemination was found to be the greatest contributor to customer orientation while responsiveness was shown to be the least contributor. The basic premise behind the internal marketing (IMO) – customer orientation relationship is the suggested interaction between the employees' feelings of being valued and the translation of such feelings and attitudes to their services towards the customer; it was concluded that employees perceived the organization's value for them, more from the process of generating and disseminating internal market information, than the actions taken in response to internal market information which in turn would lead to higher levels of customer consciousness.

Keywords: Internal Marketing, Customer Orientation

1. Introduction

Slater and Narver (1994) have pointed out that to achieve superior performance a business must develop and sustain competitive advantage based not on structural characteristics such as market power or economies of scale but on having capabilities orientation is seen as a powerful tool that provides a solid foundation for such value creating capabilities. One important conceptualization sees market orientation as functional coordination. Of the three components, customer focus is seen as the heart of market orientation (Slater and Narver, 1994). This opinion is shared by others, for instance Deshpande et al (1993) not only theorize that customer orientation is the most important aspect of market orientation but even consider it as being synonymous with it. extant literature lends support to the importance and superiority of customer orientation to the other components of market orientations as conceptualized by Slater and Narver (1994).

It has been suggested in extant literature that for firms to be able to deliver superior value to customers, it would not be enough for the firm's management to be customer oriented but that the power of customer orientation could be leveraged through internal marketing that would bring employees to share in the belief or value (Kotler, 2002). Internal market orientation does indeed have the power to enhance the effectiveness of customer orientation (Lings, 2004). In a study carried out in a developing economy setting, Amangala (2008) found that internal marketing does positively affect market orientation. It would thus appear that level of economic development may not hinder the profitable application of internal marketing. The purpose of this study is however, not to show that internal marketing is an important marketing resource. The study intends to establish the relative importance of the various components of internal marketing as they impact on customer orientation. The authors are not aware of any similar study in the context of a developing economy. It is believed that insights gleaned from this study would have practical implications.

In the next section literature will be reviewed on internal marketing and its components. This will be followed by formulation of a conceptual frame work and development of research hypotheses. This will be followed by an explanation of research methods and findings and discuss the implications of the findings.

2. Customer Orientation

There is a universal agreement as to the importance of customer orientation to the organization that wishes to deliver value to customers. Zabal (2003), after an exhaustive survey of extant literature on the subject of market orientation, identified the following different perspectives. They are the decision making perspective of Shapiro (1988); the behavioural or managerial perspective developed by Kohli and Jaworski (1990); the culturally based behavioral perspective of Narver and Slater (1990); the strategy focus perspective of Ruekert (1992) and finally the customer orientation perspective of Deshpande, Farley and Webster (1993). Zabal (2003) went on to posit that customer emphasis was at the centre of each of the five different perspectives. Given the now well documented positive influence of market orientation on business outcomes (Day 1994; Hult and Ketchen 2001; Jaworski and Kohli 1990; Narver and Slater 1990), the importance of customer orientation cannot be over emphasized.

Customer orientation may be approached from the perspective of the whole organization in which case it can be defined as “the set of beliefs that puts the customers’ needs first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders such as owners, managers and employee in other to develop a long term profitable enterprise [Deshpande et al. 1993, p. 27]. There is however an individual level perspective to the concept of customer orientation which may be defined as an individual employee’s predisposition or attitude to attend to customer needs during their job performance [Brown, Mowen, Donovan and Licita, 2001]

For this study, the individual level customer orientation is very important for two reasons: Firstly, we strongly believe that positive customer orientation cannot be achieved solely by the right organizational culture and collegial support; secondly, while organizational factors are important, internal marketing works through enhancing individual level customer orientation (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Dawes (2000) suggests that a customer orientation rather than just focusing on the generation of information on the customer, involves two other activities: [1] customer analysis, which refers to analysis of customer needs identified and also the forces that shape those needs, [2] customer responsiveness, which deals with the actions taken in response to information about customer needs or market dynamics. Customer analysis ensures that better offerings are constructed for the customer and the responsiveness ensures that not only is the information analyzed, but that action is actually taken to pursue such value objectives for the customer. Kotler and Keller (2009.p.354) observed that “clearly, the customer-centered company is in a better position to identify new opportunities and set a course that promises to deliver long-run profits. By monitoring customer needs, it can decide which customer groups and emerging needs are the most important to serve, given its resources and objectives”.

3. Internal Market Orientation

Internal marketing is an outgrowth of services marketing. The basic argument for internal marketing is the need for a strategy to create customer conscious and motivated personnel (Saad et al 2002). The concept was first introduced by Sasser and Arbeit (1976), who state that personnel are the first market of a service company. The writings of Berry however brought it to the fore of marketing literature in the 1970s. Internal marketing [IM] has as many definitions as it has been variously conceptualized. For instance, it has been defined as “the process of initiating, maintaining, and developing the relationships between employees, their management, and the organization, for the purposes of creating superior value for customers” (Bell et al, 2004); Another definition sees internal marketing as “attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining qualified employees through job-products that satisfy their needs “. Internal marketing is the philosophy of treating customers – indeed, “wooing employees... and is the strategy of shaping job products to fit human needs” (Parasuraman et al, 1991.p.151). Generally from its inception, it was developed as a means of creating customer-conscious frontline employees as a means to ensuring high service quality for customers of service organizations. Over the years, internal marketing has gained a very high level of prominence in marketing thought due to its proposed place as a prerequisite to effective external marketing (see Kotler, 2002 amongst others). In fact, a stronger relationship between the two concepts is argued by Gummerrsson (1991) who posits that internal marketing is part of market orientation, as important as the concept seems to be, there is no general consensus on the exact nature of the concept (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1993) but two streams or themes have been identified in literature (Lings, 1999, Gounaris, 2006). The first approach focuses on creating happy and motivated frontline employees based on the generally held assumption that happy and motivated employees would definitely tender those feeling of satisfaction into their service encounters with customers which would lead to the satisfaction of customer (Sasser and Arbeit, 1976). The second approach focuses on the process of service delivery

through the organization and conceptualizes the organization, its employees and its customers as one long service delivery chain.

Though the concept of internal market orientation has been discussed since the 1970s when it was introduced as a key strategy for enabling organizations to offer superior customer service, the development of the concept from theory to measurable construct has occurred perhaps only in the past eight years. While there is a consensus that employees [internal customers] are the focus of measurement in internal market orientation (George, 1990; Lings 2004; Gounaris, 2006) extant literature is replete with a proliferation of conceptualization thus preventing agreement, as to the components or dimensions of internal marketing. The absence of a single unified concept of what internal marketing [IM] is has resulted in the internal marketing concept being, for many, a vague concept (Gounaris et al, 2004).

A conceptualization of internal market orientation construct (Lings 2004) was developed and tested empirically later using five dimensions of formal face to face information generation, formal written information generation, informal information generation, information dissemination and responsiveness to information (Lings and Greenley, 2005). This measure was tested and proved psychometrically, to be a valid measure.

This model was later simplified in a study by Gounaris (2006) who reduced the dimensions from five to three through factor analysis. The construct dimensions identified by the Gounaris (2006) study were internal market intelligence, internal intelligence dissemination and responsiveness to the internal market. From the brief survey of conceptualization of internal market orientation, it was obvious that the Gounaris (2006) three dimension conceptualization had some methodological advantages, especially in view of its relative simplicity coupled with the fact that it is based on the original market orientation construct developed by Kohli and Jaworski (1990) which consists of the dimensions of gathering marketing intelligence, dissemination of intelligence and responsiveness to the use of the information.

For the purpose of this study, the Gounaris (2006) adopted dimensions of internal marketing adopted by McGrath (2009) in his study will be used. The foregoing framework is employed below in the conceptualization of our research framework, and for generating hypothesis

3.1 Internal Information Generation and Customer Orientation

Stershic (2001) posits that "In today's knowledge economy, the value of the human capital has become greater than the value of fixed assets". Internal information generation by firms is a recognition of the need to guide organizational action through enhanced understanding of things of value that are exchanged in the internal market and also for organizations to have an understanding of employee capabilities as well as their needs and wants (Lings, 2004; Ewing and Caruana, 1999). According to Lings & Greenley (2005) there are three modes of information generation. Formal information generation employs written media [e.g questionnaires and job satisfaction surveys], formal face to face interactions e.g interviews performance appraisals and meetings (Lings and Greenley, 2005; Cobb, Samuel and Sexton 1998). The formal face to face interactions complement the formal written approach. Informal information generation which occurs mostly on face to face basis enables managers to extract on a day to day basis, information not only on the needs and wants of employees, but additional information which may not be obtained through the formal mode. Generally, information generation sends the right signals to the employee that the organization is interested in what affects them, their jobs, deliberately engages in generation of information on employee needs and wants, and are able to make it known to employees that they can be open and sincere about how they feel about their jobs, working conditions, even their subordinates, this would be a means of making employee realize their importance to the firm, and would be a great boost to their work. Ultimately, this sense of importance would be transferred to their dealings with customers, as they would be willing to give customers good services as an acknowledgement of the customer's importance to the firm. Therefore, it is expected that internal information generation would lead to better appreciation for the external customer and eventually better services to the customer. The above discussion suggests the hypothesis that:

H1: There is a significant and positive relationship between internal information generation and customer orientation.

3.2 Internal Information Dissemination and Customer Orientation

The brief discussion above points to the importance of information generation. Information generation should however not be an end in itself. Research has established the fact that only information disseminated and used has

value (Gounaris, 2006; Lings and Greenley, 2005 McGrath 2009). The object of communication is the establishment of common understanding and it's the means by which organizations transfer information from one party to another (Johlke et al 2000).

Internal communication is an important prerequisite to aligning employee attitudes and behaviours with organizational goals (Guest and Conway, 2002). Firm management can use internal communications to communicate firm intentions, values and goals. This is important because a customer orientation can only be of benefit to the firm if both management and employees who are means of delivering value to customers are in agreement on the need for customer consciousness. Gounaris (2006) also suggests that listening to the opinions of firms employees in taking decisions gives them a feeling of being involved in decision making in the organization and therefore stimulates their willingness to carry out decisions that they consider partly theirs. In addition to that, employees reap a psychological value of knowing that they are part of a team and not just being a tool in the hands of management. This is expected to give the employee more satisfaction with the job and the organization and translate into good service delivery to the customer.

In some organizations information may be generated but not disseminated for a variety of reasons. Pfeffer (1998) argues that information is power. It is tempting for managers to hoard what represents a commodity that others depend on and that sharing this resource somehow diffuses that power. Another explanation is that there is always the fear that information shared with employees may easily leak out to competitors. There can never be a justification for not disseminating information in view of the fact that information dissemination has been shown to improve employee outcomes and performance (Jolke and Duhan, 2001). Information dissemination result in employees exhibiting positive attitudes and be capable of delivering value promised to the customer. In the context of internal marketing, information dissemination is imperative. Consequently, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Internal Information dissemination/communication is positively significantly related to customer orientation.

3.3 Responsiveness to Internal Information and Customer Orientation

The usefulness of internal information generation is that management become aware of labour market conditions, and exchange values are identified. Dissemination of internal information engenders and encourages communication at two levels within the organization; firstly, communication among the management cadre about the needs and wants of employees and secondly, communication between managers and employees [lateral and vertical]. Whether, it is internal information generation or dissemination of internal information, workers are better satisfied, equipped and motivated to meet the needs of the customer.

What does responsiveness to internal information achieve?

Concerning responsiveness to internal information, McGrath (2009) argue that "effective response to information gathered and disseminated helped align employees' needs with job requirements and motivated employees to achieve desired results." Lings and Greenley (2005) suggests that as the organization makes use of information generated to redesign jobs where necessary, develop better augmentors of internal product offerings [jobs] like flexible working hours, salaries, and other benefits like status, recognition etc, that this would lead to very satisfied employees. Gounaris (2006) also suggests that internal information can be used to empower employees i.e encourage them to use their discretion in dealing with customer problems without having to refer to upper management. He suggested that when employees are empowered, it leads to development of their skills and abilities and also leads to more satisfaction with their jobs. Employees who are satisfied with their jobs would be better able and motivated to offer good services to customers. Sanchez – Hernandez (2007) argue that responsiveness to intelligence affects the total reward system, training formation and development and job description in a very positive way. For instance, IMO enables the application of market segmentation a marketing tool seen by Hollensen (2010.p.282) as "one of the most fundamental concepts in marketing". This powerful marketing tool which had before now been employed mostly in the sphere of external marketing, when redirected to the internal market management is now able to identify employees in groups based on their characteristics and individual needs. This enables management to come up with policies that reflect specific segment of workers resulting in the boosting of employees citizenship behavior (Lin et al, 2010) such behaviours ultimately contribute to the satisfaction of customers. Based on the above, the third hypothesis of this study is developed,

H3: There is a positive and significant relationship between responsiveness to internal information and customer orientation.

4. Methodology

4.1. Conceptual framework of Study

In line with the literature review and the purpose of study as described at the start of the paper, the conceptual framework of the study was configured as illustrated in Fig. 1

4.2. Sample

The research was conducted among senior executives of selected Nigerian commercial bank branches, and selected insurance firms all in the city of Port Harcourt. Two branches of the twenty-five registered commercial banks and ten (10) insurance companies operating in Port Harcourt. A self-administered questionnaire was given by hand to 150 senior executives who were to give their perceptions of their firm's internal market orientation and customer orientation.

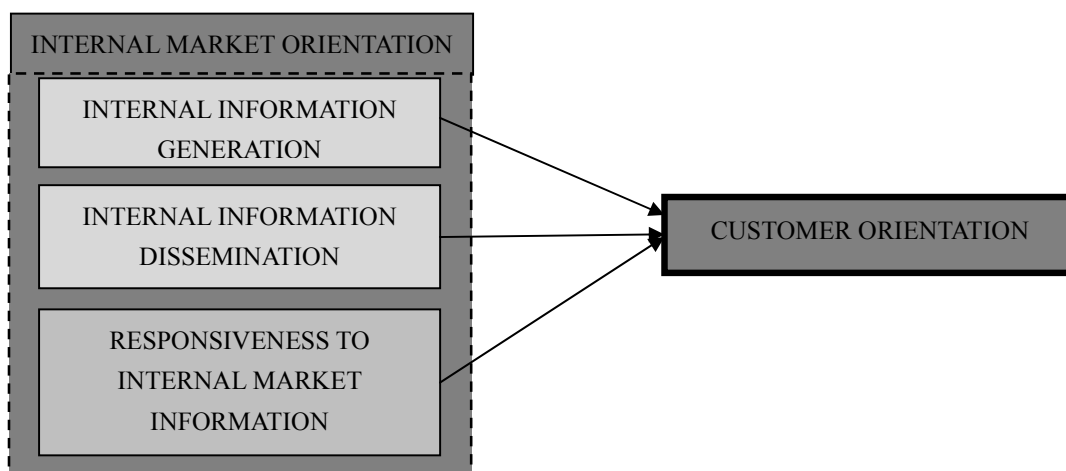


Figure 1: Conceptual model based on Gounaris (2006) and McGrath (2009).

4.3. Instrument

The study assesses the impact of the dimensions of internal market orientation on customer orientation. Customer orientation was measured using a 9-item scale developed by Narver and Slater (1990) and adapted by Dawes (2000). Internal market orientation was measured using a 15-item scale that measures the three key dimensions of the construct. The scale which was developed by Lings and Greenley (2005) was designed to measure five dimensions which are formal written information generation, formal face-to-face information generation, informal information generation, internal information dissemination and responsiveness. However for the purpose of testing the study hypotheses, all sub-dimensions of internal information generation were collapsed into one dimension for easy analysis. **internal information generation**, example, “*in this firm we do a lot of internal market research*”; **internal information dissemination**, example, “*in this firm I regularly inform staff about issues that affect their working environment*”; **responsiveness to the internal market**, example, “*in this firm, we make changes to what we do when employee feedback indicates that they are dissatisfied with the status quo.*” All scales were measured using five point Likert type scales which were anchored at strongly disagree and strongly agree.

5. Results

A total of 94 fully completed questionnaires, were used. Preliminary data analysis was conducted to check that the data has met all the necessary conditions for empirical testing. Reliability tests were conducted to assess the internal consistency of the data. The Cronbach alpha which is the common index of reliability for each sub-dimension of internal market orientation and customer orientation was computed. The results are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2: Cronbach's coefficient alphas for variables

Construct dimension	Cronbach's coefficient alpha
Customer orientation	.901
Formal face-to-face information generation	.779
Formal written information generation	.795
Informal information generation	.635
Information dissemination	.750
Responsiveness to the internal market	.869

All alphas exceed the threshold of 0.6 as proposed by Hair et al (1998).

Pearson product moment correlation was used to test the existence of a relationship between the dimensions of internal market orientation and customer orientation. This was done to check the existence of multicollinearity and explore the strength of associations between the variables. Although different guidelines have been suggested by different authors, Berry and Feldman (1985) suggest that multicollinearity exists between the independent variables when the inter-correlation between them is above 0.8. The correlation matrix for the correlation analysis is presented in table 3.

Table 3: Correlation matrix of study variables

Variables	Statistics	1	2	3	4
Formal and informal information generation	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.666	.795	.528
Information dissemination			1.000	-.139	.649
Responsiveness to the internal market				1.000	.271
Customer orientation					1.000

The tests show that multicollinearity does not exist amongst the dimensions of internal market orientation all correlations are significant at the 0.01 level. The correlations between the dimensions and customer orientation show positive relationships. Formal and informal information generation ($r=.528$), information dissemination ($r=.649$) and responsiveness to the internal market ($r=.271$).

For empirical testing of the hypotheses, the data was analysed using multiple regression analysis. The ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was used to test the fit of the model to the data. The result is presented in table 4.

Table 4: Model summary and ANOVA

	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	sig
Regression	1611.622	3	537.207	31.144	.000
Residual	1552.431	90	17.249		
Total	3164.053	93			

As can be observed from the table above, the F statistics is significant showing that there is a fit between the data and the model that is to be tested. Having established a fit between the model and the data, multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the contribution of each dimension of internal market orientation to customer orientation.

The test showed that all dimensions of internal market orientation combined have a moderate relationship with customer orientation ($r=.714$) with 50.9% of the variance in customer orientation explained by the combination of these three dimensions ($r^2=.509$). Table 5 shows the coefficients.

Table 5: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
Constant	4.355	3.414		1.276	.205
Formal and informal information generation	.480	.109	.585	4.391	.000
Information dissemination	1.738	.210	.625	8.262	.000
Responsiveness to the market	.252	.314	.106	5.805	.000

In conducting the regression analysis, the idea is to go beyond the correlation analysis to examine the contribution of each dimension of internal market orientation to customer orientation. The higher the absolute value of beta, the more important is the variable in predicting customer orientation. In this case, information dissemination is shown to be the most important contributor to customer orientation ($\beta=.625$, $p=0.000$), followed by formal and informal information generation ($\beta=.585$, $p=0.000$) and responsiveness to the market showed up as the lowest contributor to customer orientation ($\beta=.106$, $p=0.000$).

6. Discussion

The study is aimed at understanding the effect of the dimensions of internal market orientation on customer orientation. It was hypothesized that internal information generation would positively affect customer orientation. Internal information generation can be considered the “first half” of internal communications. Wright (1995) in Sincic and Vokic (2007) suggested that management needed to pay as much attention to the internal audience as is paid to the external audience. Argenti (1998) suggests that one of the goals of internal communications is to create the sense that employees are an important asset to the organization. Taylor and Cosenza (1998) also suggest that motivating employees to customer consciousness can be done not only with money and material benefits, but by giving them more control and responsibility over the decisions affecting them. This can only be done when employee opinions are taken into consideration when decisions that affect them are being made. The result of our test of hypothesis one provides empirical support for the need for management to maintain open lines of communication that give employees a sense of belonging in the firm.

Internal information dissemination was hypothesized as having a positive and significant relationship with customer orientation. Our test provides support for the positive effect of internal information dissemination on customer orientation. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) suggests that when employees are well-informed about the expectations of customers, they are more willing to discharge their duties towards those customers. Lings and Greenley (2005) also support this view by suggesting that employees should not just be told what to do, but should also be told why they should do it. In other words, employees should be given as much information as necessary in order for them to effectively serve customers. Employees feel empowered when they are given the information they need to work with, and allowed to use their discretion in dealing with customer issues as they arise. This would in turn motivate them to work hard for the customer as they know whatever decisions they take are their responsibility.

Responsiveness to the internal market was also hypothesized as having a significant and positive relationship with customer orientation. Our test of hypothesis three provides empirical support for that hypothesis. This shows that as the firm’s management gathers intelligence on the internal market, and uses it to make changes in employees’ jobs, working conditions, training etc, this would lead to more satisfied employees and better motivated employees who would be willing to put in more effort for the customer’s satisfaction. The result also provides empirical support for the assertion of Lings and Greenley (2005) that the firm’s actions in response to the information gathered from the internal market is a source of motivation and satisfaction for the employees.

7. Conclusions and Implications

Extant literature shows that the two seminal perspectives of market orientation, i.e. the cultural (Narver and Slater, 1990) and the behavioural (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) although looking at the construct from diverging points of view, converge on one simple point - market orientation is all about market information management. Market orientation captures the communication between the firm and its customers and the actions that are taken as a result of communication. Lings and Greenley (2005) developed their conceptualization of IMO on the foundation of the

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) model. In that vein, the Lings and Greenley (2005) conceptualization also highlighted the place of internal communication as the basic pillar of IMO. Internal communications which involves both the generation of information from employees, and the dissemination of information which deals with the sharing of information with employees constitutes the key part of internal marketing activities or processes. This study shows that maintaining open lines of communication with employees which enables them to be forthcoming about their feelings about their jobs, working conditions and other needs, involving them in decision making by soliciting their opinion before taking key decisions, are very important in creating highly motivated and customer minded employees. Also, the study shows that giving employees the necessary information to operate, communicating with them to give them a better understanding of the firm's goals and objectives, values etc instead of expecting them to work "blindly" helps to give them a sense of importance and make them put their best in serving customers as they are not just aware of the firm's goals and aspirations, but they also realize they are responsible for the quality of the service and the customer's satisfaction. Finally the study shows that while responsiveness to the internal market is a contributor to customer orientation, it is the least important contributor. This suggests that while employees would most certainly appreciate what ever positive changes that management would make in its job and working conditions etc, they are more appreciative of the effort the firm's management makes in communicating with them as circumstances may not always make it possible to always make immediate changes that would be seen as beneficial.

The study has implications for both managers and researchers. For managers, it suggests that just as the firm may deem the development of marketing information systems for its communication with its external customers, managers should make concerted efforts to develop internal market information systems or good internal communications systems that make it possible for them to communicate with their employees and also with themselves. Managers should actively encourage their employees to be involved in whatever the organization is doing, involve them in the decision making process, to be open and honest about their feelings about things that affect them in the office. Information "hoarding" should be discouraged actively as the study shows that attitudes and actions that block the flow of information between managers and subordinates would be counterproductive.

For researchers, the study sheds light on the place of internal communications and the responses taken as a result of such communication in driving customer orientation. Although the study on the effect of IMO on market orientation has been conducted and shown to have a positive effect by Lings and Greenley (2005), their study was based on the Kohli and Jaworski (1990) model and so far, no study has examined the relationship in the context of the Narver and Slater (1990) model, much less to isolate the effects of each of the dimensions on a single sub-construct of market orientation. This study therefore points towards a new research direction in internal marketing by isolating the effects of key dimensions of internal marketing on specific sub-constructs with further suggestions for other sub-constructs to be tested especially interfunctional coordination which is highlighted in literature as one of the key benefits of internal marketing.

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