

“Many hands make light work”: analysis of the interorganizational learning process in a hotel chain in Paraíba, Brazil

“A união faz a força”: análise do processo de aprendizagem interorganizacional em uma rede paraibana de hotéis

"La unión hace la fuerza": análisis del procedimiento de aprendizaje interorganizacional en una red paraibana de hoteles

Jammilly Mikaela Fagundes Brandão¹
Joelma Abrantes Guedes Temoteo²
Gesinaldo Ataíde Cândido³

Abstract: Among the different motivations that lead organizations to interact there is the need to acquire new skills that enable innovations of recognized economic value in the market. Through collaboration and alliances, partner organizations can share knowledge and learn from each other. On the other hand, the main role of the company is to manage its knowledge more efficiently than its competitors, and it is up to the organization to identify and protect its strategically relevant knowledge. Faced with this impasse, this study aims to analyze how the process of interorganizational learning occurs in a hotel chain in Paraíba, PB, Brazil. In this sense, a descriptive qualitative approach was developed. For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four managers of the Casa Branca Group, which currently manages three accommodation establishments, located in João Pessoa, PB. Among the main findings, it was verified that there is a constant exchange of knowledge and a continuous cooperation between the managers of the hotels of the Casa Branca

¹ Federal Institute of Brasília (IFB), Brasília, DF, Brazil. Choice of research topic, definition of research problem, purpose, and methodology, writing of the paper, data analysis and interpretation.

² Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). Department of Tourism and Hospitality (DTH). João Pessoa, PB, Brazil. Writing of the paper, construction of the theoretical framework, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, proofreading and formatting.

³ Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) and Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG), João Pessoa, PB, Brazil. Construction of the theoretical framework and general guidance, especially, in the theoretical and methodological aspects of the research.



Group and the managers of other accommodation establishments. It was also possible to observe that there is no pressure of the competitive environment of the companies or competition for the same market, and that the partnership and the alliances are generally considered more important than the isolated economic advantages. As a determining factor for this effective cooperation, the relationship of trust and clarity in communication stands out.

Keywords: Interorganizational Learning. Cooperation. Hospitality.

Resumo: Dentre as diferentes motivações que levam as organizações a interagirem está a necessidade de adquirir novas competências que viabilizem inovações de reconhecido valor econômico no mercado. Através da colaboração e alianças, as organizações parceiras podem trocar conhecimentos e aprender umas com as outras. Por outro lado, o principal papel da empresa consiste na administração de seu conhecimento de forma mais eficiente que seus competidores, cabendo a organização identificar e proteger seu conhecimento estrategicamente relevante. Diante desse impasse, esse estudo tem como objetivo analisar como ocorre o processo de aprendizagem interorganizacional em uma rede paraibana de hotéis. Nesse sentido, desenvolveu-se uma pesquisa descritiva de abordagem qualitativa. Para a coleta de dados foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com quatro gestores do Grupo Casa Branca, que administra atualmente três meios de hospedagem, localizados em João Pessoa-PB. Dentre as principais constatações, foi verificado que há uma constante troca de conhecimentos e uma contínua cooperação entre os gestores dos hotéis do Grupo Casa Branca e os gestores de outros meios de hospedagem. Foi possível observar ainda que não há uma pressão do ambiente concorrencial das empresas ou competição pelo mesmo mercado, e que a parceria e as alianças, geralmente, são consideradas mais importantes do que as vantagens econômicas isoladas. Como fatores determinantes para essa efetiva cooperação, destaca-se a relação de confiança e a clareza na comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem Interorganizacional. Cooperação. Hotelaria.

Resumen: Entre las diferentes motivaciones que llevan a las organizaciones a interactuar está la necesidad de adquirir nuevas competencias que viabilicen innovaciones de reconocido valor económico en el mercado. A través de la colaboración y alianzas, las organizaciones asociadas pueden intercambiar conocimientos y aprender unas con otras. Por otro lado, el principal papel de la empresa consiste en la administración de su conocimiento de forma más eficiente que sus competidores, correspondiendo a la organización identificar y proteger su conocimiento estratégicamente relevante. Ante este impasse, ese estudio tiene como objetivo analizar cómo ocurre el proceso de aprendizaje interorganizacional en una red paraibana de hoteles. En ese sentido, se desarrolló una investigación descriptiva de abordaje cualitativo. Para la recolección de datos se realizaron entrevistas semiestruturadas con cuatro gestores del Grupo Casa Blanca, que actualmente administra tres medios de hospedaje, ubicados en João Pessoa-PB. Entre las principales constataciones, se verificó que hay un constante intercambio de conocimientos y una continua cooperación entre los gestores de los hoteles del Grupo Casa Blanca y los gestores de otros medios de hospedaje. Es posible observar que no hay una presión del entorno competitivo de las empresas o competencia por el mismo mercado y que la asociación y las alianzas generalmente se consideran más importantes que las ventajas económicas aisladas. Como factores determinantes para esa efectiva cooperación, se destaca la relación de confianza y la claridad en la comunicación.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje Interorganizacional. Cooperación. Hotelaría.

1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest studies about learning date back to the 1960s, however, the concept of organizational learning received more attention in the academic and professional areas as of the 1990s, when knowledge management also emerged with greater prominence in the organizational context. Since then it became frequent to associate strategic management to learning and knowledge (Godoy & Antonello, 2011; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 2008).

During this period, in order to gain competitive advantage, organizations began to seek the development of intelligent processes that could optimize the process of creating, storing, organizing, disseminating, and applying tacit and explicit knowledge (Souza, 2004; Silva, 2009; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 2008). According to Nonaka, Toyama, and Byosiére (2001), in recent years, many studies have demonstrated the knowledge, and the ability to create and use it, as an important source of organizational competitive advantage.

When analyzing organizational studies, it is observed that there is a predominance of the business vision as an obsessive and one-dimensional pursuit of profitability, in which organizations, inserted in a capitalist context, take on an extremely competitive position, often denying the importance of goals and broader social thinking. However, strategic partnerships, business cooperation, and interorganizational learning approaches (Andreis et al., 2014) are alternatives to this predominant model.

Strategic partnerships can be understood as voluntary arrangements between

organizations, encompassing exchanges, sharing and joint development of products, technologies, and services (Gulatti, 1998). In this approach, we have included studies related to interorganizational learning (Wegner, 2011; Knight, 2002; Levinston & Asahi, 1995), which provide a series of reflections on how business is done and how organizations (and individuals) can benefit if their relationships are based on cooperation, especially when these studies start from a network perspective (Wegner, 2011) using the sociocultural approach (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001).

On network learning, Wegner (2011, p. 541) points out that "learning from partners and exchanging knowledge is a natural process as companies and individuals with different skills and competences create partnerships." Child (2011) states that networks carry out exchanges of information and knowledge capable of stimulating technical, systemic, and even strategic learning. However, the author emphasizes that the type of learning that can be generated depends on the purpose, involvement, and needs of partners. In addition, there are a few interorganizational learning moderators, as will be seen later, which can both limit or encourage knowledge sharing and learning between organizations (Child, 2011).

Among organizational learning studies, there is a predominance of those that approach the phenomena from a reductionist and unidirectional perspective, in which only the intraorganizational dimension is considered (Smith, Grupta & Shalley, 2006). In these studies, the emphasis is on the creation and structuring of organizational learning based on the organization's relationship

with its environment, disregarding the strategies that involve the interactions of an organization with other organizations. However, Wegner (2011, p. 538) points out that "it is the balance between these two learning processes (intra-and interorganizational) that allows embracing present and future opportunities."

Recognizing the need and relevance of the organization to learn with the internal development of knowledge obtained and developed by the organization itself as well as the experience from other organizations, considering the complementarity between these learnings (Wegner, 2011; Knight, 2002; Levinston & Asahi, 1995; Levinthal & March, 1993), the interest in developing this study was manifold and emerged from the following questions: What is the importance of external partnerships in the learning process and organizational knowledge? How can competing organizations be partners? Is it possible to gain competitive advantage by becoming partners with competing organizations? How can organizations share knowledge through the interorganizational learning process and at the same time protect their knowledge so that their processes are unique and not copied?

Based on these findings and in the face of all the concerns presented, this study aims to **analyze the interorganizational learning process of a hotel chain in Paraíba**. The survey was conducted with managers of a hotel chain in Paraíba (PB), Brazil which currently manages three accommodation establishments located in João Pessoa, PB. The choice to study a case of the hotel sector in

the capital of Paraíba is justified by the widespread knowledge in common sense that in the hotel business there is a strong relationship of cooperation between hotel managers. The decision to choose the Group under study, which operates in the market since December 2011, was because its managers were open and interested in participating in the survey. On the contrary, contacts made with managers from another hotel chain in Paraíba were unsuccessful.

This research is characterized as a descriptive case study with a qualitative approach (Yin, 2005). For the data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Manzini, 2003) with four managers from a hotel chain in Paraíba: The Casa Branca Group. The data collection instrument consisted of 20 questions, organized into four thematic sections: 1) profile of the interviewees, accommodation establishments, and hotel chain; 2) the process of interorganizational learning; 3) the cooperation/competition relationship and the strategic partnerships for learning; and 4) the moderating factors of network learning.

In the next section, we discuss the interorganizational learning from a strategic perspective, highlighting the factors that influence this learning process between organizations. Then, the methodological procedures used in this study to reach the pre-established goal is presented. Next, it follows the discussion of results in three sections: the profiles of research subjects and organization; the process of interorganizational learning; moderating elements of interorga-

nizational learning. At last, the final considerations and the references that supported this study is presented.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Understanding the organizational learning cycle

In recent decades, the learning process in the organizational context has become an interesting research object/phenomenon, supported by the argument that learning is a strategic renewal tool for the organization, essential for survival in competitive and dynamic environments (Andreis et al., 2014).

Organizational learning is based on four processes: the acquisition of knowledge, the distribution of information, the interpretation of information, and organizational memory. In the first process, the organization acquires knowledge by monitoring the environment, making use of information systems to either store or retrieve information. In the second process, the organization shares information with its units and members, developing learning and producing or understanding new knowledge. Then the third process begins when information is distributed and understood. Lastly, the process which refers to the organizational memory, considered as storage, in which all knowledge is stored for future use (Huber, 1991).

In a very similar way, Starkey (1998) considers that the organizational learning cycle comprises four stages: production and dissemination of learning, integration of new

information in the organizational context, shared collective interpretation of information, and introduction of new perspectives.

It is observed that in both models (elaborated by the two authors previously mentioned), the learning process begins with the acquisition of knowledge, then it follows the sharing phase and, lastly, the process ends with the exploration of the organizational memory. From the perspective of network learning, this cycle occurs through the interaction of organizations that belong to a network and has as a common goal the acquisition of new skills that enable innovations. This discussion will be further explored in the next section.

2.2 Interorganizational learning, partnerships, and competitive advantage

The current business and management environment is characterized by increasingly intense competition as a result of the increase in the use of information and technology. In addition, there are new demands for both organizations and their various types of social actors involved. In this context, the use of management approaches based on the principles of social networks such as cooperation, partnership, and complementarity have been growing, among them strategic partnerships and new practices of interorganizational learning (Andreis et al., 2014).

Wegner (2011, p. 540) defines interorganizational learning as that which "happens in the context of organization groups

that cooperate proactively". In this approach, we highlight network learning, which is not merely the sum of the individuals and organization learning that make up the network, but it is characterized by changes in properties at the network level. It is from the interaction and the relationships between the participants that the interorganizational learning is possible and its effects can be perceived in the organizations that compose the networks.

Child, Faulkner, and Tallman (2005) emphasize that among the different motivations that lead an organization to interact with other organizations is the need to acquire new skills that enable innovations of recognized economic value in the market. Interorganizational learning is at the heart of innovation practices (Ferreira, Schreiber & Puffal, 2016). Through collaboration and partnerships, partner organizations can exchange knowledge and learn from each other, thus providing a way for the renewal of essential competencies (Andreis et al., 2014; Child, 2011; Hamel & Prahalad, 1995; Cohen & Levinthal, 1989).

In the face of environmental uncertainties, organizations are constantly challenged to seek ways of sustaining themselves and growing in the market in which they operate, being essential to acquire specific and essential competences so that they can attain competitive advantages over their competitors. From a multidimensional perspective on competencies, it is understood that they are "the organization's ability to sustain coordinated resource allocations in order to help the company achieve its objectives"

(Heene & Sanchez apud Leite & Porse, 2005, p. 62).

The development of skills in the company is the result of knowledge integration. Thus, it becomes necessary the ability to align and integrate knowledge - created by the organization and acquired through interaction with other organizations, considering that the broader the scope of this integrated knowledge in a competency, the greater the difficulty of imitation by competing companies (Oliveira Jr., 2001).

Oliveira Jr. (2001) points out that, through collaboration and partnerships, partner organizations can exchange knowledge and learn from each other, becoming a vehicle for new organizational learning and for the renewal of the company's essential competencies. On the other hand, the same author stresses that the main role of the company is to manage its knowledge more efficiently than its competitors, and it is up to the organization to identify and protect its strategically relevant knowledge. Lei, Hitt, and Bettis (2001) assign to the highest levels of management the responsibility to develop capacities to build processes and products that are difficult to imitate in the pursuit of competitive advantage.

In this context, cooperation has become an important strategy to a company with disadvantages in the market or that intends to extend its competitive conditions in a dynamic environment (Wegner, 2011, p. 538). On the other hand, although there are collaboration and partnerships between the organizations, each company will (or shall) have its idiosyncratic capacity, where it is

necessary to maximize value through the development of resources, as well as the integration and combination of strategically relevant knowledge and essential competencies.

Furthermore, Wegner (2011, p. 542) emphasizes that the interorganizational learning process "is not a continuous and uninterrupted advance: there are setbacks, adjustments, and obstacles", influenced by several elements considered moderators in the promotion of this learning (Child, 2011), the theme of the next section.

It is important to highlight the relevance of understanding the moderating factors and how they interfere in the learning process, considering that by knowing and managing them it is possible to analyze and improve the learning practices and strategies used by the organizations.

2.4 Moderating elements of network learning

It is understood as moderating elements of learning those factors that exert a positive influence (encouragement/promotion of learning) or negative (inhibition/interruption of learning) in one or more of the stages in the learning cycle: understanding – action - interpretation - incorporation of knowledge in the organization.

Wegner (2011), based on other authors, highlights some elements considered moderators in the promotion of interorganizational learning. Similarly, van Wijk, van den Bosch, and Volberda (2003) also highlight some factors that exert influence on learning, these being associated with the characteristics of the networks.

According to Wegner (2011), the moderating elements of the interorganizational learning can be grouped into three categories: general context elements (pressure of the competitive environment of companies and competition for the same market); network level elements (level of trust/quality of relationships, power reactions among participants, control mechanisms, information/communication mechanisms, and shared goals); and elements at the level of the participating companies (predisposition of participants in learning, and complementary knowledge). In the same line, van Wijk, van den Bosch, and Volberda (2003), emphasize the factors that influence learning associated with the characteristics of the networks: structural and relational density, social capital, trust, intentions, receptivity, absorptive capacity, ambiguity, hierarchy, and integration.

It is important to highlight that the variable "time" is determinant in the process of learning and knowledge creation. Child (2011) points out that the cooperative partnership develops as a relationship over time in terms of a life cycle. According to the author, the type of learning created in the network will depend on the purpose, the involvement, and the partners' needs, and all these elements can be modified over time, i.e., throughout the different phases of the network development: initial contacts, training, development, and consolidation. Thus, it should be noted that the variable time can both positively influence this learning process, or it can be a limiting factor.

Thus, it is observed that the time factor can contribute, given that the maturity of

business relationship tends to generate greater interaction and expansion of the contact between the participants and, consequently, more trust in the group and willingness to exchange information, generating systemic and even strategic learning. On the other hand, over time, the network relationship may become less advantageous. That is, this relationship may reach a point where there is no more learning, and the network members may lose interest in continuing to participate in the cooperative partnership, either by the change of purpose or needs, or by the lack of motivation to continue, due to lack of learning.

Moreover, it is important to note that chronological time is not synonymous with maturity. As Wegner (2001) points out, the network's lifetime is not a sufficient condition to ensure more advanced levels of learning, but rather a maturity. It is through the maturity of the cooperative relationship (and this is not limited to the temporal question) that the participants move from sharing basic information to more strategic one.

In summary, this study sought to demonstrate how important organizational learning is in a network (Wegner, 2011; Levinthal & March, 1993) and that cooperation and strategic partnerships for learning can be very beneficial for organizations (Oliveira Jr., 2001; Gulatti, 1998). However, it is necessary to consider the existence and influence of a series of factors that can both facilitate and hinder the learning process (Wegner, 2011; van Wijk, van den Bosch & Volberda, 2003).

3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This research is characterized as a descriptive case study with qualitative approach (Yin, 2005). For data collection, semi-structured interviews (Manzini, 2003) were conducted with four managers of a hotel chain in Paraíba, Brazil, consisting of three enterprises located in the city of João Pessoa, PB.

The interviews were conducted in November 2016, all registered through an audio recorder, with the prior authorization of the participants. The data collection instrument (interview script) consisted of 21 questions organized into 4 thematic sections: 1) profile of the interviewees, accommodation establishments, and hotel chain; 2) the process of interorganizational learning; 3) the cooperation/competition relationship and the strategic partnerships for learning; and 4) the moderating factors of network learning.

The interviews were previously scheduled, and all were carried out at Unit II of the chain where the Group's administrative office is located. After data collection and transcription of interviews, the data was organized according to categories of analysis: 1) knowledge acquisition and conveyance between the chain's hotels and other hotels in the city; 2) organizational memory; 3) cooperation/competition relationship; 4) strategic partnerships; and 5) the interorganizational learning's moderating elements, which are divided into three subcategories, as can be seen in Table 2.

In Table 1 it is possible to observe the analysis categories of the study as well as the authors of reference for each category since the analysis relates the data and the literature addressed in the theoretical frame

work of this study.

Finally, it is important to point out that, to protect the identity of the participants, we used the designation E1, E2, E3,

and E4 for interviewee 1, interviewee 2, interviewee 3, and interviewee 4, respectively. In the next section, the survey results will be presented.

Table 1 - Script of the Semi-Structured Interview - Central questions used in data collection

<p>1 Profile of interviewees, accommodation establishments, and hotel chain Gender? Education? Job position? Time of operation in the network and in the job position? Year of foundation of the chain? Number of units managed by the chain? Organizational structure?</p>
<p>2 Interorganizational learning process How is knowledge acquisition made? How is the distribution of knowledge accomplished? How does the process of knowledge management take place in the network? What is an organizational memory? Is learning in network hotels passed from the individual to the organizational level or the opposite, from the organization to the individual?</p>
<p>3 Cooperation/competition relationship and strategic alliances for learning Is there knowledge exchange at all levels between chain managers and other hotel managers? Is there use of technology, such as social networking? How is the relationship between the group’s managers and managers from the other hotels? Is it a relationship of cooperation or competition? In your opinion, can competing organizations be partners? Is it possible to gain competitive advantage by joining competitors?</p>
<p>4 Moderating factors of network learning Are there any impediments related to role limitation, limitation of knowledge absorption, limitation of public or situational learning in the hotels managed by the network? Are there contextual factors in the chain that inhibit learning? As for the "unlearning" process, how is it done in the chain, for the withdrawal of bad habits or practices that do not meet the employees’ expectations?</p>

Source: The authors (2017)

Table 2 - Research Analysis Categories

Categories of Analysis	Subcategories of Analysis	Reference Literature - Authors
Acquisition and transfer of network knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interorganizational - at the level of the hotel group under study; 	Andreis et al. (2014) Wegner (2011); Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W., and White, R. E. (1999); Starkey (1998);

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network - between chain’s hotels and other hotels in the city. 	Huber (1991).
Organizational Memory	--	Starkey (1998); Huber (1991).
Cooperation/Competition Relationship	--	Oliveira Jr. (2001) Hamel and Prahalad (1995)
Strategic Alliances	--	Gulatti (1998) Cohen and Levinthal (1989)
Learning moderators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements of the general context; • Network-level elements; • Elements related to the characteristics of the companies. 	Wegner (2011); Child (2011); van Wijk, van den Bosch and Volberda (2003).

Source: The authors (2017)

4 RESULTS

The presentation and analysis of the results followed the same structure of the interview script used in the data collection, which includes four sections: the first sought to gather information about the profile of the interviewees, the accommodation establishments, and the hotel chain to which they belong; the second section aimed to understand how the process of interorganizational learning happens; the third section sought to identify the interviewees' perception of the cooperation/competition relationship and strategic partnerships for learning in the hotel industry of João Pessoa, PB, and finally, the fourth part of the script sought to analyze the moderating factors of interorganizational learning, in the studied hotel chain.

4.1 Profile of research subjects and the hotel chain in study

Commercial and Financial Directors and Managers participated in the survey. They are responsible for the management of three hotels belonging to the Casa Branca Group, established 5 years ago, in João Pessoa, PB. All the interviewees are men and have a college education, training in accounting, administration, law, and hotel management. The directors interviewed are also founders of the Group, the other two survey participants have been on the hotel chain for more than a year, and even before joining the group, they and have had previous professional experience in the hotel industry.

According to the interviewees, the Casa Branca Group came on the market with the aim of offering a unique product that could bring refinement, sophistication, and quality at an attractive price. Thus, the first hotel appeared: Casa Branca Inn Unit 1. Soon after, due to the good results and the growing demand, the other units were inaugurated.

Currently, the group owns and manages three hotel complexes: Unit I, Unit II, and Unit III, called Executive. In all complexes, there are bedrooms for up to four people, and the breakfast is included in the room rate. Unit III stands out for its refinement and sophistication when compared to the other establishments of the chain.

On the other hand, according to the chain's official website, the quality of service provided is the same. The Casa Branca Group has a "tradition of serving well". Its characteristic is to train its employees through partnerships with specific organizations, as well as associated with institutions involved in the analysis of innovative practices and capacities and quality programs.

In the next section, it will be presented the data about the process of interorganizational learning, in which it will be possible to understand how the process of knowledge acquisition and exchange between the hotels happens, as well as, to understand how the group's organizational memory is constructed.

4.2 The process of interorganizational learning: knowledge acquisition and sharing and organizational memory

Recognizing the need and relevance for the organization to learn with both the internal development of knowledge obtained and developed by the organization itself, and the experience of other organizations considering the complementarity (Wegner, 2011; Levinthal & March, 1993), some questions were raised on the existing relationship between hotels managed by the Casa Branca

Group, as well as with other hotels of different brands.

As far as the knowledge acquisition and exchange between the chain's hotels and the others is concerned, all the interviewees informed that there is a constant exchange of information. Two of the participants emphasized that this knowledge-sharing often happens regarding commercial and operational matters. As far as the financial subject is concerned, there is still some communication difficulties.

On the commercial and operational sides, yes. On the financial side, no ... Because there is no one to listen. We do not talk about it. The guy is afraid to talk to you. It is the same thing as talking about dying (...) So, operationally and commercially, we communicate well. But with regard to the financial part is very complicated (E2).

Knowledge can even be shared in the commercial, operational sectors (...), but not the financial. I can speak for my area. In the financial sector, there is no such thing. At least not directly (...) I do not have access to this information from other hotels. On the contrary, it is up to each one to keep theirs. But what I see from other sectors, mainly commercial, is that there is cooperation (E4).

E3 points out that the knowledge sharing between hotels takes place much more technically and operationally:

At the management level, I think that each one already has his own guidelines and decisions, so normally we do not share this kind of

knowledge, because each one already works on a path, on a straight line. So, there's no such thing as I'm going to do this sales action and I'll agree with the hotel x. This does not exist (E3).

In agreement, E4 presented possible explanations for this to happen: "they are different systems, strategies, and ways of working. Each one has his own way."

Still on the exchange of knowledge among the chain's hotels, the research participants highlighted the ease in these exchanges of information, with the advancement of technology. According to E4, the use of the "What's App" application for the exchange of experiences and knowledge among professionals from various sectors of the hotel is common in the Chain: "matters such as work schedules, day offs, this we can solve quickly via What's App. Technology has come to help."

E1 reported the relevance of technologies to the Casa Branca Group:

We have a What's app group with all the staff, and we have Skype on all the hotels' computers. We find out a problem from another hotel here, and often we solve it from here. That is our daily routine! Our 'good morning' is that we have a problem with breakfast; the housekeeper did not arrive. Our 'good morning' is to solve the problem via What's App today (E1).

The use of this application extends to and is effective in the communication relationships between Casa Branca group's managers and other hotel managers in the city,

as reported by E1:

Through personal What's App ... I have this guy phone number, so I'm communicating ... We have groups, but these groups are more for discussions about tourism as a whole and what actions we intend to do, analyzing in a more general way. This is a more personal knowledge exchange.

As important as gaining knowledge outside the organization, is storing it within the organization. In this respect, organizational memory, considered as storage in which all knowledge is stored for future use (Huber, 1991), interviewees reported that in the hotels managed by the Casa Branca Group, there are guidelines and standard procedures.

Here we have a practice that we do not find in other companies. I did not have it in the companies where I worked, which is to retain knowledge in the organization. We always try to put it in folders, via the system, which is the virtual folder and even in physical ones. Here we know that we are not from the company, and the company continues to exist if you leave. So, we seek to keep our knowledge in the company. Leave it in the company, so that somehow other people can also enjoy it (E3).

Yes, Yes! Even before I started working here, I already had done consulting here. So, by the time I got here, I already had the routine I had been through, and when I replaced the old one (employee), the routine was already done ... The board of directors makes it very clear. That it is

always good to leave the knowledge to the company" (E4).

Based on the interview data, one can see that the organizations of the studied chain frequently communicate with each other and share knowledge (both with each other and with other hotel organizations in João Pessoa) at technical and operational levels, especially as far as business matters are concerned. One can observe, in addition, that there is also the concern to store the knowledge acquired through these relations in the organization itself, which constitutes the organizational memory (Huber, 1991). These findings show the relationship of mutual trust between managers from the studied hotel's chain with other hotel managers in João Pessoa and the aspiration for collective growth, in a network. The next section will emphasize the cooperation relationship and the strategic partnerships between these hotel organizations.

4.3 The cooperation/competition relationship between hotels and strategic partnerships for learning in the hotels in João Pessoa, PB

In João Pessoa, in the state of Paraíba, there are three hotels managed by the Casa Branca Group, and thus we asked respondents if there is any kind of competition between these hotels in the chain. Interviewee 3 said no, and clarified: "For example, I am from the commercial sector, so I have an obligation to keep all hotels full and busy. There is no such thing as outperforming the other.

I have to keep all three hotels full." E4 complements:

Competition? No! Everyone helps each other. The receptionist starts in the afternoon, he knows what the occupancy is, and he informs the group's staff: "Hey! I only have one vacant room!", The staff congratulates you because it's almost full and such, and there it is. If any receptionist sees that the occupancy is low and he reports it, then the staff turns their eyes to it. Then if a hotel guest arrives to make a reservation in another unit, to increase the occupancy on the one that is low, the guest is sent there. They help each other a lot.

According to the interviewees, the relationship is one of cooperation because, although they are located in the same region and have the same brand, each one has its market share, due to its own characteristics, in line with Oliveira Jr. (2001) who addresses the idiosyncratic capabilities of organizations, the result from the combination of strategically relevant knowledge and core competencies.

Oliveira Jr. (2001) considers as intangible and idiosyncratic resources that can provide competitive advantage for the company: better integration among its many activities in order to respond more quickly to market demands; greater workforce commitment in a way to provide better service to customers; high rate of innovative and good quality products that help attract customers.

E1 illustrated how the cooperation between Casa Branca's hotels and other ho-

tels in the city takes place, noting that partnership and alliances, in some cases, are more important than economic advantages.

Yes ... this relationship today happens in the healthiest way possible in João Pessoa. Today I have an internal administrative demand that I do not know how the other hotels behave. I pick up my phone, I make three phone calls, and I find out. So, there is a great transparency and knowledge exchange. Both, from the administrative, commercial or the sales side ... 'I am full.' I say: 'hey, I am with the 'over' of 10 apartments, do you have 10 apartments for this weekend? – I have! - I'll send it to you, that's the rate. Can you do it? - I can. My rate is higher, but I can make it. So ... I mean, we have an extremely healthy relationship with the other hotels (E1).

I have been here for a year, and I've always witnessed this cooperation relationship, and even in other groups, I've always fight for it. I think in union is strength. There is a hostel that comes in contact and needs help, because it's full and we receive the guests here, even though we have a higher rate, we charge their price(E3).

E2 emphasizes the cooperation among the hotel industry managers in Paraíba but highlights the limitations and weaknesses of shared knowledge. I think there is a cooperation between hotels. I think that this cooperation, this exchange of information is very cool. However, the part of knowledge itself is extremely deficient. The hotel industry in João Pessoa today, compared to

Europe is still in the Middle Ages. With the difference of using computers (...) and it is not something that only exists in João Pessoa. It is a fact in Brazil, in general. But, the exchange of information in the commercial department and operations of the hotel business itself is awesome! (E2).

In addition to the exchange of information and collaboration within the Casa Branca Group, there is this same attitude and practice between the chain hotels and other hotels. The interviewee highlighted some situations that illustrate the cooperation between accommodation establishments.

On a daily basis, there is a lot of cooperation. People really help each other. Like, if we got full here, when I had two establishments, and they were full, I kept calling people, and I'd say, 'Hey man, do you have any available room? – I do. - I'm sending people there!' I had a reservation request, and I'd say: I do not have a room, but I have a partner and such. It is a risk for you to hand your guests over to others. Because if they go there and like it, they become their customers (E2).

They are well connected, cooperation is great. If they attend an event, they travel together, share rooms, exchange information. So, they help themselves a lot (E4).

When questioned about the relevance of strategic partnerships to gain a competitive advantage for the hotel chain, interviewees said they believe that, although there is a risk in exchanging information and

knowledge, cooperation is the best way, because it is a win-win situation.

In my opinion, weighting up the risk-to-gain benefit, the benefit is greater. So, it is better to take the risk of giving information, while a financial manager of mine wins, how much an operator of mine wins than holding this information and not have access to information that I think it's relevant. So, I think there is more benefit than risk (E1).

Here we talk about it a lot. When we go out to do an action, for example, we go out to announce the destination, because if I have a full house in my hotel, there is a left over for the other hotel; if the other hotel has a full house, then there is left over for me. So, on this focus, we are united; there is no competition (E3).

E2 emphasized that this cooperative relationship is a characteristic of João Pessoa hotel industry:

We have a relationship between companies that is very difficult to see. We travel all over Brazil. It is very difficult for us to see such a union. On destinations that we go to, including this trip, I started asking, and everybody seemed astonished by our policy of ABIH being on the front, promoting actions, promoting the union.

E3 agreed and complemented:

This is particular of João Pessoa market. Because when you talk about other markets, since we work with other parallel markets: Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte, they

don't have that. And we managed to identify that João Pessoa has this partnership, this cooperation."

E1 presented possible explanations for the existence of this cooperative relationship in the hotel business.

I usually say it's easier to have this attitude in the destination of João Pessoa because there is a full house. In a destination like Recife, where hotels have 35-40% occupancy rate, it becomes more difficult. Ah! I will not say this. I'll go to São Paulo, to such company and I won't tell anyone because if I go, someone will want to go along, go there and take it... his hotel is better, it will charge less. So, Joao Pessoa is on a very positive moment, which allows us to do that. If this will last, if that won't change... I pray that it doesn't change! But for us, it is much easier today because of the moment that we live (E1).

When asked if it is possible to have a competitive advantage by aligning themselves with competitors, all interviewees answered positively. E2 stressed that the partnerships are very positive, "each one has its differential, its product, well developed, elaborated, everything, then there is nothing to fear."

The information presented in this section verifies that organizations, through collaboration and partnerships, can share knowledge and learn from one another, thus providing a means for the renewal of competencies (Child, 2011; Hamel & Prahalad, 1995; Levinston & Asahi, 1995).

The next section presents the data referring to the elements that interfere in the process of interorganizational learning.

4.4 Moderating elements of interorganizational learning

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the exchange of knowledge between organizations can be interrupted due to the existence of moderate elements in the promotion of interorganizational learning (Wegner, 2011; van Wijk, van den Bosch & Volberda, 2003). In this sense, some questions about these elements were asked, and the results are presented below.

As previously mentioned, Wegner (2011) groups these elements into three categories: the general context elements, the network level elements, the elements related to the level of the participating companies. Conversely, van Wijk, van den Bosch and Volberda (2003) describe the factors that influence the learning associated with the networks' characteristics themselves.

In relation to the general context elements, it was possible to observe in the interviewees' reports that there is no pressure from the companies' competitive environment or competition for the same market. E2 recognizes that there is a natural competition between hotels, but he explains the cooperation that exists in the daily business of hotels in João Pessoa.

There is natural competition, especially in events, because you are there to sell. I'm sorry, everybody's here to sell. So, if everyone is selling there, you have to run after yours,

right? However, daily, there is a lot of cooperation. People really help each other. (E2).

Likewise, the existence of trust between the company's managers is noticeable, characterized by positive relations, with clarity in the information/communications and the existence of shared objectives, among them, announcing the destination Paraíba (network level moderating elements).

Yes if I have difficulty in a certain area, I call the director, I ask ... if we have a need of ... an operational problem, then I call on an operational leader of another hotel, or to the operational management and ask the question. Anyway ... there is an exchange based on trust (E1).

When we go out to do an action, for example, we go out to announce the destination, because if I have a full house in my hotel, there is a left over for the other hotel; if the other hotel has a full house, then there is left over for me (E3).

As for the elements at the level of the study group (participants' willingness to learn, and complementary knowledge), interviewees reported that the Group is always seeking to update and learn, as well as share its knowledge with other managers.

Our Group are 4 years old ... it is growing, and our speech and the attitude show that we are running after knowledge, to improve more and more. Theoretically, we behave this way and assume that they are in the same "vibe". Let's run after

knowledge, so that opportunities may come to everyone (E1).

The company's organizational culture requires continued learning from them. It is one of the values of our internal marketing that we preach a lot. Here we have a culture of personal development, culture of knowledge sharing, culture of leadership development (E2).

In addition to the moderating factors of interorganizational learning presented by Wegner (2011), the factors that influence the learning associated with the networks characteristics described by van Wijk, van den Bosch, and Volberda (2003), are observed, in this study, such as structural and relational density, social capital, trust, intentions, receptivity, absorptive capacity, ambiguity, hierarchy, and integration.

E2 described a situation that highlights some of these aspects, such as relational density and trust between hotel managers and managers of other segments, as well as the receptivity and absorptive capacity of the Casa Branca Group.

A couple of weeks ago, a restaurant owner here, one of the biggest restaurants here, an excellent restaurant, told the group that he had purchased a financial spreadsheet. [I've been working with finances for 2 ½ years. Initially, E4 taught me a lot, then the graduation course forced me to learn a lot and E4 is an accountant, and I'm a financier. So, the subjects complement each other.] What did I do? I took it. He said: Does anyone want the spreadsheet? I said, "I do". Then he sent it (E2).

An important variable in the process of learning and creating knowledge in networks highlighted by Child (2011) is time. According to the author, the type of learning created in the network will depend on the purpose, the involvement, and the partners' needs, and all these elements can be modified over time, i.e., throughout the different phases of the network development: initial contacts, training, development, and consolidation. In these terms, it was asked whether there was a delay in the cooperation between the hotels. E4 reported, "this has happened for a long time." The others have confirmed that this has always existed in the hotel industry in João Pessoa.

Finally, it was asked if there are gatherings, meetings between the chain hotels' managers with managers from other hotels to carry out these knowledge exchanges. The interviewees stated that there is a friendship between these professionals and that the meetings happen informally and during trips to participate in trade fairs and other events outside the state, as already presented in reports in this study.

Under these terms, we conclude that cooperation has become an important strategy for organizations to increase their competitive conditions in a dynamic environment (Wegner, 2011; Child, 2011; Hamel & Prahalad, 1995; Levinston & Asahi, 1995).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study demonstrates a shift in business focus: network organizations stop acting relentlessly selfish and greedy and take a healthier stance toward a thriving

community. Solomon (2006, p. 38) points out that "business is, above all, social interaction and cooperation in a sophisticated sense, not a vulgar competition. It is productivity, not mere pursuit of profit". In other words, in the corporate world there is no need for a winner and a loser, a win-win relationship is entirely possible. Through interorganizational and network learning, corporate arrangements, and strategic partnerships, for example, all organizations involved can benefit.

In the study, it was verified that there is no pressure from the companies' competitive environment or competition by the same market, as it is noticeable there is trust between the company's managers, characterized by positive relationships, with clarity in the information/communications, by the existence of objectives and the participants' willingness to learn, and complementary knowledge.

It was also evident that, besides the knowledge acquisitions and exchanges, as well as the collaboration between the hotels Casa Branca Group, there is this same attitude and practice between the chain hotels and the other hotels also. In addition, it was noted how technological innovations help in this process, given, for example, that the What's App application is used to exchange experiences and knowledge among professionals from various sectors of the hotel, quickly and efficiently.

The findings confirm that organizations, through collaboration and partnerships, can share knowledge and learn from each other, thus providing a means for the renewal of competencies (Child, 2011; Hamel & Prahalad, 1995; Levinston & Asahi,

1995). It is concluded that, although there are collaboration and partnerships among the organizations, each company will (or shall) have its idiosyncratic capacity (Oliveira Jr., 2001), as well as the integration and combination of strategically relevant knowledge and skills essential for gaining competitive advantage.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this study is an initial effort to understand the process of interorganizational learning in the hotel industry. Other studies, including in other segments of the market, may bring new contributions.

REFERENCES

- Andreis, A., Prantz, C., Larentis, F., & de Ávila Dias, D. T. (2014). *Aprendizagem Interorganizacional: um estudo de caso na empresa Alfa*. *Revista Inteligência Competitiva*, 4(2), 39-55.
- Child, J. (2011). Learning through strategic alliances. In: DIERKES, M.; BERTHOIN ANTAL, A.; Child, J. & Nonaka, I. (Ed.). *Handbook of organizational learning and knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 308-326.
- Child, J., Faulkner, D. & Tallman, S. (2005). *Cooperative strategy: managing alliances, networks, and joint ventures*. 2. ed. New York: Oxford.
- Cohen, W. M., & Levinthal, D. A. (1989). Innovation and learning: the two faces of R & D. *The economic journal*, 99(397), 569-596.

- Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W., & White, R. E. (1999). An organizational learning framework: From intuition to institution. *Academy of management review*, 24(3), 522-537.
- Easterby-Smith, M., & Lyles, M. A. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of organizational learning and knowledge management*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Ferreira, K. L., Schreiber, D., & Puffal, D. P. (2016). Análise reflexiva do turismo em saúde à luz da inovação. *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa em Turismo*, 10(2), 254-273.
- Gherardi, S. & Nicolini, D. (2001). The sociological foundations of organizational learning. In: DIERKES, M. et al. (Org.) *Organizational learning and knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 35-60.
- Godoy, A.S. & Antonello, C.S. (2011). Aprendizagem Organizacional e as Raízes de Sua polissemia. In: Antonello, C.S. & Godoy, A.S. (Org.) *Aprendizagem Organizacional no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Bookman, p. 31-50.
- Grupo Casa Branca. (2017). *Grupo Casa Branca Hotéis e Pousada*. Disponível em: <http://www.grupocasabranca.com/>. Acesso em: 15 de agosto. 2017.
- Gulatti, R. (1998). Alliances and networks. *Strategic Management Journal*, 19, p. 293-317.
- Hamel, G. & Prahalad, C. K. (1995) *Competindo pelo futuro: estratégias inovadoras para obter o controle do seu setor e criar os mercados de amanhã*. Rio de Janeiro: Campus.
- Huber, G. (1991). Organizational Learning: the contribution processes and the literatures. *Organizational Science*, 2(1), p. 88-115.
- Knight, L. (2002). Network learning: exploring learning by interorganizational networks. *Human Relations*, 55(4), p. 427-454.
- Lei, D.; Hitt, M.A. & Bettis, R. (2001). Competências essenciais dinâmicas mediante a metaaprendizagem e o contexto estratégico. In: Fleury, M. T. L. & Oliveira Jr., M. M. *Gestão Estratégica do Conhecimento: integrando aprendizagem, conhecimento e competências*. São Paulo: Atlas, p. 157-186.
- Leite, J. B. D. & Porse, M.C.S. (2005). Competição baseada em competências e aprendizagem organizacional: em busca da vantagem competitiva. In: Ruas, R.L., Levinthal, D. & March. J. (1993). The myopia of learning. *Strategic Management Journal*, 14, p. 95-112.
- Levinston, N.; Asahi, M. (1995) Cross-national alliances and interorganizational learning. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24(20), p. 50-64.
- Levitt, B. & March, J. G. (1988). Organizational Learning. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, pp. 319-340.
- Manzini, E.J. (2003). Considerações sobre a elaboração de roteiro para entrevista semi-estruturada. In: Marquezine: M. C., Almeida, M. A. & Omote; S. (Orgs.) *Colóquios sobre*

- pesquisa em Educação Especial. Londrina: Eduel, p. 11-25.
- March, J. G. & Olsen, Johan. P. (1975). The Uncertainty of the Past: Organizational Learning Under Ambiguity. *European Journal of Political Research*. 3, 147-171.
- March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science*, v. 2/1, p. 71-87.
- Nonaka, I., Toyama, R. & Byosière, P. (2001). A theory of organizational knowledge creation : understanding the dynamic process of creating knowledge. In: DIERKES, M.; Antal, A.B.; Child, J.; Nonaka, I. *Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press, cap. 22, p. 491-517.
- Oliveira Jr., M. M. (2001). Competências Essenciais e Conhecimento na Empresa. In: Fleury, M. T. L. & Oliveira Jr., M. M. *Gestão Estratégica do Conhecimento: integrando aprendizagem, conhecimento e competências*. São Paulo: Atlas, p. 122-154.
- Silva, A. B. (2009). *Como os gerentes aprendem?*. São Paulo: Saraiva.
- Smith, K. G., Gupta, A. K. & Shalley, C. (2006). The interplay between exploration and exploitation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49, p. 693-706.
- Solomon, R. C. (2006). *Ética e Excelência: cooperação e integridade nos negócios*. Rios de Janeiro – RJ.
- Souza, Y. S. (2004). Organizações de Aprendizagem ou Aprendizagem Organizacional. *RAE-Eletrônica – Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 3(1), Art.5, Jan/Jun.
- Starkey, K. (1998). What can we learn from the learning organization?. *Human Relations*, 51(4), p. 531-546.
- Takeuchi, H. & Nonaka, I. (2008). *Gestão do Conhecimento*. Porto Alegre: Bookman.
- Wegner, D. (2011). Aprendizagem Interorganizacional: um estudo das redes horizontais de pequenas empresas. In: Antonello, C.S. & Godoy, A.S. (Org.) *Aprendizagem Organizacional no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Bookman, p. 537-564.
- van Wijk, R., van den Bosch, F.A.J & Volberda, H.W. (2003). Knowledge and Networks. In: EASTERBY-Smith, M. & Burgoyne, J. (Org.). *The Blackwell handbook of organizational learning and knowledge management*. Malden/USA, cap. 30, p. 428-453.
- Yin. R. K. (2005). *Estudo de caso: planejamento e métodos*. 3 ed. Porto Alegre: Bookman.

Informations on the authors

Jammilly Mikaela Fagundes Brandão

Professor at the Federal Institute of Brasília (IFB), in the field of Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure. PhD student in Management in the Graduate Program in Management – PPGA
E-mail: jammillybrandao@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-8826-9762

Joelma Abrantes Guedes Temoteo

Professor at the Department of Tourism and Hospitality (DTH) in UFPB. PhD student in the Graduate Program in Development and Environment in PRODEMA.

E-mail: joelma.abrantes@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9013-7945

Gesinaldo Ataíde Cândido

Full professor of General Management at the UFCG, researcher at CNPq. Research group leader in the field of innovation and technology. Professor in the Graduate Programs in the Federal University of Paraíba and the Federal University of Campina Grande.

E-mail: gacandido@uol.com.br

ORCID: 0000-0002-3112-0254