



Assessing the Impact of Internal Marketing on Sustainable Competitive Advantage: A Case of Kabul-based Health Sector of Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalized and knowledge-based economy, organizations need to acquire competitive advantage in order to survive and prosper. With no doubt intangible assets, such as training and development and work support plays critical role for organizations to obtain competitive advantage over their rivals. In particular, providing high quality services are critically surviving issues for the organizations provide services. Thus, the current study investigated the relationship between internal marketing and sustainable competitive advantage targeting health sector, for this study we selected five leading government hospitals as a sample size among 14 in total of the population. Adopted questionnaires were distributed among 265 employees working in different positions. The key area in this study was internal marketing, sustainable competitive advantage, training and development, employee's empowerment, reward system and internal communication. Furthermore, SPSS software was used to analyze collected data. The study accepted all hypotheses and explored positive relationship between given variables.

Keywords: Internal Marketing, Internal Communication, Training & Development, Reward System, Sustainable Competitive Advantage

INTRODUCTION

Success in the future challenging market needs readiness for conscious and fast reactions (Sadeghi, 2009). On the other hand, in the contemporary knowledge-driven and service-focused economy, businesses must secure a sustainable advantage to ensure their survival and future competitiveness. Since competitive advantage is at the core of a firm's success or failure, obtaining a sustainable competitive advantage is substantial for organizations which are operating in a dynamic, challengeable, ambiguous and global competitive environment (Riwo-Abudho et al., 2013). In the 21st century, the service industry is the fastest growing industry (Fatma & Timothy, 2005).

In service organizations, the most significant factor of competitive advantage is providing competitive service quality and the ways of providing high quality services (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Sayyedjavadin et al., 2011).

Organizations in Afghanistan are service-oriented industry these days functioning in a complex, dynamic and ambiguous environment which are characterized with the nonstop modifications that persistently take vicinity in its socio-cultural, economic, political, technological and worldwide situations. This area (health sector) is confronted with severe oppositions in the international economic markets. The need to persist to maintain in the competitive market compel businesses to be more proactive in relationship with their current and prospective customers.

The health sector is and an essential sector in Afghanistan that has lately gained an increasingly significant role in the nation's economic growth and development.

Service-oriented industries worldwide are experiencing significant transformations due to the influences of liberalization, privatization and globalization that emerged toward the end of the 20th century. The evolution is particularly evident in services sector such as telecommunication, health, tourism, education, insurance and banking.

This trend has equally led to stiff and intensive competitions among major businesses in the world over. In most developing countries like Afghanistan, about 60% of the workforce are employed in these service-oriented sector that include retailing and wholesaling, tourism and hospitality industries, educational institutions, health care services, recreation and entertainment industries, financial services as well as communication and construction industries (McColl & Morley, 2005; O'Neill, M., & Palmer, 2001). It was predicted in 2000 that by 2010, service-oriented industries will make up about 52% GDP of the developing countries which might help to improve the country's employment, national income, balance of payment and foreign exchange rates (Hill, 2007; Petzer & Steyn, 2008). Specifically, the services sector plays crucial role in Afghanistan's economy that contributes 45% to Afghanistan GDP (The World Bank, 2024) .

Despite the significant unmet demand within Afghanistan's business climate, there are limited incentives for top management to adopt employee or customer-oriented strategies essential for sustained business success. Consequently, organizations must respond to this dynamic environment and heightened competition by becoming more attuned to customer attitudes and employee's satisfaction (Aghazadeh & Osanlou, 2007). High level of competition, expectations, shifting businesses and technological forces health sector to redesign more effective marketing strategies to satisfy customers. This is because, to be competitive in the competitive market, the right kind of staff in the right setting might help the health sector by providing high-quality services to the potential customers. Parasuraman, Zeithami & Berry (1985; 1990) also mentioned that the key strategy for the success and survival of any business institution is the deliverance of quality services to customers. Ravichandran, Prabhakaran & Kumar (2010) opined that the level of service quality offered will determine customer satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty. After reviewing some research articles from related areas, the research gape found. Most of the researchers focused on internal marketing and its impact on organizational performance, customer retention, competitive advantage, and employee's satisfaction mainly targeting banking sector.

As a result, the current study targeted health sector in Afghanistan which is new area, the current research focused on key new dimensions for instance employee's commitment, employees training and development and reward system. According to recent research organizations success is dependent to tangible and intangible assets which plays crucial role (Sayyedjavadin, 2011). To attain sustainable competitive advantage, it's important to acquire qualified and service-oriented workforce as they can set best parameters towards organizational achievements (Mousakhani, 2007). The concept of internal marketing holds that the service organizational personnel are the first and key market of a company itself and plays crucial role in competitive advantage. The motive to launch internal marketing in health sector is the requirement to understand how to get attitudinal change among the workforce toward service mindedness and customer focus will enable the organization to compete more successfully in the market (Papasolomous & Kitchen, 2004).

In recent decades, internal marketing was proposed as a main solution to the obstacles of delivering higher service quality (Gounaris, 2008). However, a very few organizations implement this (Internal marketing) concept in practice which causes low adoption rate by organization (Gounaris, 2008).

In a rapidly evolving competitive landscape, organizations, including hospitals, encounter numerous challenges that require resolution. One significant issue is determining how to improve competitive advantage. Consequently, organizational leaders and managers have diligently pursued strategies aimed at achieving sustainable competitive advantage. One solution to this challenge is internal marketing, which affects employee performance and transforms service processes through innovative ideas, ultimately resulting in a competitive advantage. Organizations must prioritize their internal elements, specifically by focusing on the satisfaction and employee's performance. It is impossible to effectively satisfy external customers unless the internal stakeholders within the organization are content, as this is essential for enhancing the organization's competitiveness (Yeum et al., 2020). The current research explores and figures out the level of internal marketing perception in the health sector organizations in Kabul city, the capital of Afghanistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internal Marketing

According to Varey and Lewis (2000) the concept of internal marketing was first introduced in the year 1970s and further developed by Cristian Gronroos in 1985 and defined internal marketing as “the application of marketing principles and practices within an organization to align, motivate, and empower employees to deliver a consistent and positive customer experience” cited by (Kotler, 2016; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003). Ballantyne (2009) noted that internal marketing is a strategy for the development of relations between workers across the service organization boundaries. Haji Abdul & Al-Dmour (2010) indicated that workers are viewed as internal customers in the business environment in some organizations but some ignore it. To meet internal and external needs of customers, internal marketing should be considered as a management technology for both satisfaction and support (Gronroos, 1985; George, 1990). Moreover, internal marketing can lead organizations to attain its goals in the shape of enhancing customer satisfaction and innovation (Jalilvand & Tabaeian, 2019; Tajeddini, 2011).

Internal marketing focuses on achieving effective internal exchanges of value and symbols between the organization and its employee groups as a prerequisite for successful exchanges with external markets (George 1990). Service organizations for instance health sector chooses to develop, motivate and encourage their workforce aim to generate outstanding competitive business advantages are highly resulted in positive way compositely than other organizations do not (Sudhir & Sangitta, 2010).

Training and Development

Noe (2017) defines training and development as “an organized method of training and development is designed to increase employee abilities, knowledge, and skills in order to boost individual and organizational performance”. Training and development practices in the healthcare sector is continuously developing in technological advancement (Thimbleby, 2013). Therefore, hospital management should remain commitment to improve staff skills, knowledge and behavior for sustainable competitive advantage (Mosadeghrad, 2014; Bohr & Memarzadeh, 2020). Such commitment requires a comprehensive strategic investment in training and development programs focused on current technological tools for the advancing of healthcare efficiency and gaining sustainable competitive advantage (Gould et al., 2004). For the prosperity of healthcare companies in this tough competitive market place, training and development programs play significant role in gaining competitive edge and highlight the importance of training and development the ongoing training and development to meet the current needs of the business and quickly response to customers needs (Chong & Choi, 2004; Huebner & Flessa, 2022).

Employees Empowerment

According to (Nayak & Mohanty, 2018; Kreitner & Kinicki) employee empowerment refers to the process of enabling employees to set their own work goals, make decisions, and solve problems with their spheres of responsibility. Employee empowerment comprises of improvement in skills, independence in decision making and recognition of staff contributions and achievements lead to job satisfaction and feel sense of ownership in their routine activities (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Employee empowerment is a pivotal factor in enhancing healthcare services in the current competitive market. While Ani (2007) confirming that empowerment necessarily mean the delegation of authority to subordinates.

Reward System

Reward system refers to a structure approach by an organization to acknowledge and motivate employees for their great performance and contribution for objectives of the business. It includes a range of incentives such as monetary remuneration, wages, recognition and future opportunities for career development in the healthcare industry (Figueiredo, 2025). Previous studies indicated that reward system is one of the prominent tools that influences job satisfaction, retention, helps in knowledge sharing and assist to the business's sustainable competitive edge (Abasili et al., 2017; Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2019; Beqiri & Aziri, 2022; Eneh et al., 2022; Gal & Hadas, 2015; Jayawardena & Jayawardena, 2020; Onu et al., 2022; Salman & Olawale, 2021; Tarigan et al., 2022).

Internal Communication

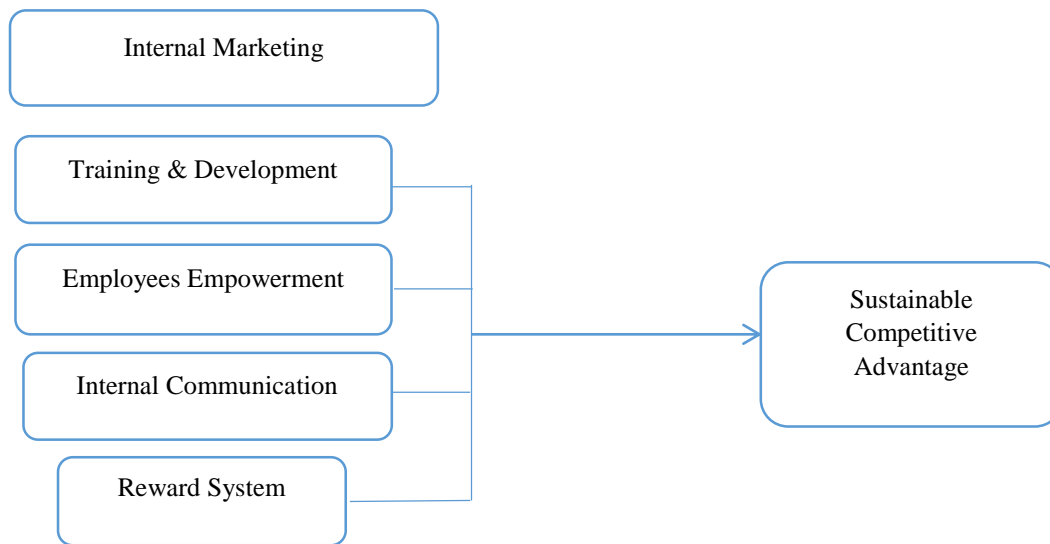
Internal communication refers to a way to share information effectively among staff of a business. This includes all the interactions between employees and internal all stakeholders inside the organization. (Kharchi, 2010; Verčič, 2021). According to Lings (2004) internal marketing is a source of internal communication between business and employees and help the business deliver ideas and opinions to attain organizational goals through cooperative culture. By designing effective internal communication strategies assist the healthcare businesses to build a cooperative environment and improve coordination among workers by providing high healthcare services in the competitive market (Rezaee et al., 2022).

Relationship between Internal Marketing and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The concept of competitive advantage was first mentioned by Michel E. Porter in 1985 in his book "Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance". He clarified that businesses can gain competitive edge in a manner that are different from their rivals (Porter, 1985; Passemard & Kleiner, 2006). Effective internal marketing strategies enhance workers commitment is significant for employee's performance. When employees are engaged and motivated, they are likely to deliver best quality services to customers which lead to customers satisfaction. This satisfaction and commitment can lead to sustainable competitive advantage in the long-run (Caldwell et al., 2015). Warraich et al., (2013) conducted research in telecom industry in Pakistan and discovered that service quality in healthcare organizations must be considered a source of competitive advantage. Shim and Choi (2014) demonstrated that internal marketing correlates with job satisfaction, customer orientation, and organizational performance. The studies recommended that managers and CEOs should focus on strengthening competitiveness by implementing effective internal marketing strategies.

According to Ines and Jasmina (2010) indicated that internal communication plays significant role in providing quality of services for sustainable gaining a competitive edge. A study conducted by Weng (2016) highlighted that internal marketing positively influences employee's satisfaction in the health sector and these results align with previous studies (Weston & Cahill, 2012; Tansuhaj & McCullough, 1988).

Conceptual Framework



Source: Author Proposed Model

Hypotheses

H1: There is positive relationship between internal marketing and sustainable competitive advantage.

H2: There is positive relationship between training and development and sustainable competitive advantage.

H3: There is Positive relationship between employee's empowerment and Sustainable competitive advantage.

H4: There is positive relationship between reward system and sustainable competitive advantage.

H5: There is positive relationship between internal communication and sustainable competitive advantage.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current research is quantitative in nature as well as the researcher used descriptive survey. According to Kothari (2004) descriptive survey is a type of survey focuses on making specific predictions, detailing facts and characteristics related to an individual, group or situation. The five-points Likert scale were labeled as below.

5= Strongly agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree & 1= Strongly Disagree

Population

The population for this study is comprised of five leading government hospitals which are; Jamhuriat Hospital, Rabia Balkhi Complex Hospital, Emergency Hospital, Sheikh Zayed Hospital and Children Health Care Hospital in Kabul city. The total population of these hospitals was about 1000 employees. Questionnaires were distributed among managers, customer service managers, supervisors, employees and line staff within the organization as respondents.

Sampling

A probability sampling procedure was employed, ensuring that each staff member had an equal chance of being included in the sample to minimize bias (Tull & Hawkins, 1980). The researcher used a stratified random sampling method to select respondents for completing questionnaires. This approach allows for the examination of various subgroups. While equal sample sizes are typically recommended, stratified simple random sampling is more effective when the population is heterogeneous and comprises multiple subgroups, providing a more

representative sample than simple random sampling (Ary, 2002). Additionally, the study's sample size included 265 employees from various selected hospitals.

Data Collection

The researcher used primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data collected by the help of questionnaires. Closed and open-ended questions were used to enable the respondents express their views. Kothari (2016) argues that questionnaires generate data in a very systematic and orderly manner. The Questionnaire contained seven parts from part 1 to part 7. Part 1 for demographic information of the respondents, Part 2 for internal marketing, (Dumitrescu, Cetina, & Pentescu, 2014). Part 3 for training and development, (Falola, Osibanjo, & Ojo, 2014). Part 4 for employee's empowerment, (Kahre et al., 2011). Part 5 for reward system, (Jahani et al., 2011). Part 6 for internal communication, (Zwijze-Koning, & de Jong, 2007) and Part 7 for sustainable competitive advantage, (Toor & Ofori, 2009). The data was analyzed through SPSS software.

RESULTS

H1: There is positive relationship between internal marketing and sustainable competitive advantage.

Table 1: Regression analysis Between IM & SCA				
Model	R	R Square	F	Std. Error of the Estimate
IM & SCA	.147	.022	.218	1.95027
a. Predictors: (Constant), Internal Marketing				

The regression analysis indicates a positive relationship between internal marketing (IM) and sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), as shown by an R value of 0.147. However, the R Square value of 0.022 suggests that only 2.2% of the variance in SCA is explained by IM, indicating a very limited impact. Hence H1 is supported.

H2: There is positive relationship between training and development and sustainable competitive advantage

Table 2: Regression Analysis Between T & D and SCA				
Model	R	R Square	F	Std. Error of the Estimate
T&D and SCA	.313	.098	.195	1.87249
a. Predictors: (Constant), Training and Development				

The regression analysis reveals a moderate positive relationship between training and development (T&D) and sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), with an R value of 0.313. The R Square value of 0.098 indicates that approximately 9.8% of the variance in SCA is explained by T&D, suggesting a modest influence. In summary, while T&D shows a moderate positive association with SCA. Hence H2 is supported.

H3: There is Positive relationship between employee's empowerment and sustainable competitive advantage

Table 3: Regression analysis between EE & SCA				
Model	R	R Square	F	Std. Error of the Estimate
EE & SCA	.147	.022	.118	1.95027
a. Predictors: (Constant), Employees Empowerment				

The Regression analysis shows between employees' empowerment and sustainable competitive advantage is .147 shown by R value. It indicates that there is a positive relationship between employee empowerment and sustainable competitive advantages. Thus, $f = 11.8$, $p < .001$. Hence H3 is supported.

H4: There is positive relationship between reward system and sustainable competitive advantage

Table 4: Regression analysis between RS & SCA				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
RS & SCA	.711	.506	.504	1.38562
a. Predictors: (Constant), Reward System				

This indicates a strong positive correlation between the reward system (RS) and sustainable competitive advantage (SCA). It shows that the two variables move in the same direction, and the relationship is fairly strong and suggesting that an effective reward system significantly contributes to achieving a sustainable competitive advantage.

H5: There is positive relationship between internal communication and sustainable competitive advantage

Table 5: Regression analysis between IC and SCA				
Model	R	R Square	F	Std. Error of the Estimate
IC & SCA	.321	.103	.100	1.86735
a. Predictors: (Constant), Internal Communication				

The regression analysis reveals a moderate positive relationship ($R = 0.321$) between internal communication and sustainable competitive advantage, with internal communication explaining 10.3% of the variance in sustainable competitive advantage. The model is statistically significant ($F = 10.0$, $p < .001$), indicating that internal communication has a significant impact on sustainable competitive advantage. These results support H5, confirming that internal communication positively influences sustainable competitive advantage.

DISCUSSION

This research examines the impact of internal marketing on sustainable competitive advantage in the health sector of Afghanistan. The results found that internal marketing has significant relationship on sustainable competitive advantage in the health sector of Afghanistan. Internal marketing plays a crucial role in aligning employees with the organization's goals and enhancing their engagement which encourages innovation and allows organizations to adapt more quickly to market changes, customer needs and maintaining a competitive edge. Rafiq & Ahmed

(2000) found that internal marketing is a critical factor in achieving strategic alignment, which helps firms differentiate themselves in competitive markets.

CONCLUSION

The paper explored relationship between internal marketing and sustainable competitive advantages with some examining constant variables such as training and development, reward system, employees' empowerment and internal communication. The findings of the study explored positive relationship between internal marketing and sustainable competitive advantage as shown in above tables, therefore the current study accepts H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5.

The findings of this study provide a better understanding of the relationship between internal marketing on sustainable competitive advantage. Generally, the following recommendations are suggested according to the findings of this research. The implementation of internal marketing policies within the health sector will elevate the employee's job satisfaction and work motivation which will lead to high level of customer satisfaction to gain sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, health sector should enhance internal marketing specifically rewards system must be revised and enhanced to achieve external marketing objectives. This study limits to health sector in Kabul city so the researchers can conduct internal marketing with other variables in other sectors as well.

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