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INTERNAL MARKETING AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF SMES IN THE EDV INDUSTRIAL SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the industrial sector, this research aims to identify conditions for the implementation of internal marketing concepts among employees and its impact on the organisational performance. Only one study was found simultaneously integrating the two constructs. It concerned the cork processing industry alone, yet considered expanding the efforts – namely, using qualitative exploratory research in the form of 10 in-depth interviews based on a script of generally open questions – to the entire industry in the Portuguese region between rivers Douro and Vouga. The unit of analysis was constructed considering distinct features as well as activity criteria and the geographic location, thus ensuring the necessary heterogeneity. The results inform about the awareness of the internal marketing conceptualisation. The research found that all analysed enterprises had more or less structured model frames and worked with the conceptualisation of the guidance for the internal market, a strategic concern, and in some instances, this concept was an organisational desideratum in the sector. In addition to the lapse of the research according to a qualitative paradigm of exploratory nature, the main limitation is the need for objective sustainability of the results obtained through future quantitative studies to promote an integrated triangulation of their outcomes. The research allowed identifying the companies that use organisational models conducive to the individual well-being of employees and facilitating the desired orientation to the market.

KEY WORDS

internal marketing, performance, industrial production sector, EDV

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INTRODUCTION

The western region of Portugal between rivers Douro and Vouga, known as Entre Douro and Vouga (EDV), is undergoing rapid urban development favoured by the privileged location. In particular, cities São João da Madeira, Santa Maria da Feira and Oliveira de Azeméis are situated on national roads No 1, IC2, A1 and IC1, and their industry represents

around 45% of the total GVA of Entre Douro and Vouga (approx. 6.3% of the national industrial GVA). Compared to the northern region (24%), industrial products of this sub-region make a significant (outstanding) contribution, which shows the importance of specialisation of the industry in Entre Douro and Vouga (Simão et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to understand the circumstances for the implementation of the concept of internal marketing among employees and its impact on the organisational performance. Marketing literature recognises that all employees of an organisation are internal customers who must be served in a customer-oriented manner by the employees and management (Conduit & Mavondo, 2001; Jungsun et al., 2016) to maximise individual performance and positively impact on the relationship of the company with its external clients (Richardson & Robinson, 1986; Ceric et al., 2016).

Thus, to facilitate adequate orientation to the external market (Lings & Greenley, 2005; 2010), on which the organisational performance depends, the internal marketing concept needs to focus on the internal staff-management mechanisms (Gray et al., 2002; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

It should be underlined that performance of companies depends on the moderating or leveraging role of a managerial mechanism (its functioning) (Lings, 2004; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Tortosa et al., 2009). The final objective of such mechanisms is the optimisation of results and, consequently, the contribution to the business development (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1998; Conduit & Mavondo, 2001). In other words, to provide superior value to clients, a higher value needs to be targeted in each aspect of organisational processes (Barnes & Morris, 2000).

Qualitative exploratory research with an interpretative position (Yin, 2003b) was developed to empirically explore internal marketing & organisational performance. This type of research focuses on the identification of the relationship between analysed variables to explain the entrepreneurial behaviours that lead to the expected practices resulting from the bibliographic review. The structure of this work is as follows: the introduction is followed by a theoretical framework and the used methodology. Then, the empirical results are presented and analysed. Finally, research considerations are developed with reference to potential limitations and indications for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The increase in the economy of developed countries, which occurred in the last decades of the last century, allowed companies and the academy to devote considerable resources to the promotion of

quality levels in service delivery. The “service” delivery process involves the active interaction between clients and employees. The result of this interaction represents a relevant element in the final evaluation of the “product” received by the customer (Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004; Gounaris, 2006; Várnai & Fojtik, 2008; Lee, 2016). This implies a change in the relational paradigm, moving from the focus on the company as an economic unit of production to its exterior, from the point of view of customer satisfaction, paving the way for internal customer satisfaction issues (Bansal et al., 2001; Rodrigues, 2004; Gounaris, 2006; Jou et al., 2008).

The internal market orientation should therefore be an integral part of organisational culture and guide the attitudes and behaviours of its members through the application of marketing concepts, centred on all employees according to a generalised paradigm (Lukas & Maignan, 1996; Gronroos, 1997; Conduit & Mavondo, 2001; Gounaris, 2006; Chow, 2015).

Internal marketing is a way of promoting the company and its products to its employees, engendering involvement in and commitment to the organisation’s strategic programmes as prerequisites for targeting that can lead to successful results for companies (Greene et al., 2003). Considering this goal, financial capital is no longer perceived as the key success factor and has been replaced by human capital (Shiu & Yu, 2010; Jungsun et al., 2016).

Internal marketing should function as a continuous improvement (Ballantyne, 2003) process, aligning organisational goals with stimulated employee behaviours that lead to better performance and assumed higher levels of responsibility (Quester & Kelly, 1999; Varey & Lewis, 1999; Che Ha et al., 2007), thus improving the performance of the organisation (Vasconcelos, 2008; To et al., 2015).

Based on Kohli & Jaworski (1990), Rodrigues & Pinho (2010) maintained that the internal market orientation through internal marketing conceptualisation and market orientation are a set of activities – generation, dissemination and response to information received from respective markets – that translate the transition from a business philosophy to practice.

Considering this guideline, Lings & Greenley (2005) demonstrated that the internal market orientation has a positive impact (i) on customer satisfaction and (ii) competitive positioning of an organisation. Organisations must focus on the internal market before adopting market orienta-

tion (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Gounaris, 2006; Jou et al., 2008; Tortosa-Edo et al., 2010).

This extended understanding, which according to Arnett, Laverie & McLane (2002) presents various benefits, is relevant to the finding that the satisfaction of certain needs regarding “sellers” (Gounaris, 2008) would imply a direct external customer satisfaction (Greene et al., 1994; Varey, 1995; Varey & Lewis, 1999; Ballantyne, 2004).

Internal marketing crosses the functional boundaries of marketing and human resources. The satisfaction of customers depends on the satisfaction of employees (Lings, 2004; Várnai & Fojtik, 2008; Gray, 2008; Gounaris, 2008; Kaur, Sharma & Seli, 2010; Huang & Rundle-Thiele, 2014), therefore, conditions for the implementation of external marketing strategies depend on the dissemination of internal marketing efforts among employees. This is because the most important capital of companies is their workforce (Lings, 2004; Gounaris, 2006; 2008).

A perspective towards the adaptation of marketing to be used inside an organisation was created, understanding that marketing managers should formalise internal marketing programmes based on the same framework principle used to set goals for the external market (Piercy & Morgan, 1990; Varey, 1995; Varey & Lewis, 1999; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Jou et al., 2008; Rainey, 2014).

The internal marketing orientation specifically contributes to the market orientation in general by the awareness of an internal supplier–client philosophy that leads to a greater commitment to the company’s objectives and greater motivational attitude (Lings, 2000; Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009; Kaur, Sharma & Seli, 2010; Theodoridis & Panigyrakis, 2010). The internal marketing orientation is the internal equivalent of market orientation (Lings & Greenley, 2005; Várnai & Fojtik, 2008; Gounaris, 2008).

The behaviour of managers towards subordinates influences their attitudes and behaviours, and the result of this interaction is perceived as a strategic factor impacting the final product provided to external clients (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Várnai & Fojtik, 2008; Kanibir & Nart, 2012).

According to Kohli & Jaworski (1990), companies that resort to an internal marketing operation, which is associated with specific management behaviours, aim to construct an appropriate market orientation (Lings & Greenley, 2010). It is important to adopt the principles of market orientation (Gounaris, 2008; Kaur, Sharma & Seli, 2010; Azêdo & Alves, 2013), which is based on results obtained by external

customers (Webster, 1992; Lings & Greenley, 2010; Javadein et al., 2011).

This is how modern marketing management considers customer satisfaction, which should be rooted in all achievements of an organisation through its symbiotic relationship with the internal customer. The intention is to create added value for all parties involved (Foreman & Money, 1995; Piercy, 1995; Seiders et al., 2005; Che Ha et al., 2007). It is important to note that several studies demonstrate the direct relationship between the final performance of the offer and the contact staff (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002; Tortosa et al., 2009; Jungsun et al., 2016).

In this perspective, marketing orientation for the internal market is essential for business success. The satisfaction of employee needs ensures the retention, development and motivation of qualified and best-performing employees. The provision of a systematic framework supports the importance of market orientation (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002; Schneider et al., 2003; Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009; Malik et al., 2010; Rodrigues & Pinho, 2010).

Regarding the relationship between internal marketing practices and organisational performance, most studies have provided evidence that employee attitudes are related to organisational performance and demonstrated that market orientation is related to attitudes and behaviours of employees (Farrell, 2000; Kwon & Hu, 2000; Schneider et al., 2003; Rodrigues, 2004; Lings & Greenley, 2010).

Furthermore, at the end of this chain, market orientation leads to better delivery solutions in relation to customer needs and preferences, which improves performance conditions, giving companies a sense of the market and a special connection with customers, meeting their needs and creating value (Franco et al., 2001; Rodrigues, 2004; Kirca, 2011).

Thus, market orientation as a marketing concept has a positive effect on the profitability of organisations and, considering the potential of this effect on performance; it has a contributory role in the establishment of business strategies (Chang & Chang, 2007).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The literature review discovered several studies on the relationship between internal marketing orientation and market orientation in the industrial sector and SMEs. Since little or nothing was known

Tab. 1. Interviewed companies

| COMPANY | MAIN PRODUCT | LOCATION |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A. Henriques II, S.A. | Rubber components | S. João da Madeira |
| Abílio P. Carneiro & Filhos, Lda. | Shoe industry | Fiães VFR |
| Biocutter – Engenharia e Equipamentos Industriais, Lda. | Machines and equipment | Vale Pereiras – Vale de Cambra |
| Deltamatic – Engenharia e Automação Industrial, S. A. | Machines and equipment | Carro Quebrado – Pindelo OAZ |
| Kalurcap – Injecção de Peças em Plástico, Lda. | Plastic Products | S. João de Ver VFR |

about the studied issue, an exploratory study was deemed to be the most appropriate way forward. Qualitative research was developed integrating recorded structured interviews (Yin, 2003b) based on open or semi-open questions and a methodological approach to the case study, which was especially adaptable and contemplating.

In the exploratory phase, considering that the observation of multiple cases is indicated as preferable and contributes to the robustness and amplitude of the analysis (Carson et al., 2001; Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b), the chosen unit of analysis was a company from the manufacturing sector, irrespective of the final product.

In the light of the above and considering that direct qualitative studies aim for an in-depth rather than an extension analysis, it was neither necessary to use very large samples, nor to apply statistical methods to determine the size (Sánchez, 1999). Consequently, five companies were observed and interviewed twice each. Top managers were interviewed in all instances.

Five cases were selected from among the companies listed by the journal *Diário de Aveiro* as 1 500 Largest Companies Aveiro 2015. These cases were selected based on their geographical location and considering they represented different business realities, thus guaranteeing the necessary heterogeneity.

As this study specifically aims to understand how the internal marketing practices impact on the business strategy for the external market orientation and organisational performance, the prevailing issue was decomposed into questions regarding the relationship between analysed variables. During different moments of the analysis, this method contributed to the understanding of the global phenomenon *per se*.

Aiming to identify the ways and reasons management policies are applied in the encouragement of employees to be considered as internal customers and, consequently, to engage them in the application of management procedures leading to good performance results, internal marketing practices and mar-

ket orientation were identified as the analysed constructs.

The interviews were audio-recorded, and their duration varied between one and two. The environment was considered depending on the possibility to have an interview and the availability of the interviewees. This in loco analysis took place between March and early July 2016, and as the research developed in the context of content analysis, qualitative data analysis software webQDA was used.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The understanding of market orientation is focused on the ability of companies to collect, distribute and react to information about the market in which they operate or intend to operate, allowing a convergent centralisation for different interventions, thus achieving higher levels of performance (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Piercy et al., 2002; Rodrigues, 2004).

The research aimed to describe and identify ways and reasons the market orientation is influenced by the strategic application of the conceptual tools of internal marketing.

To achieve this, the empirical work structure focused on interviewing middle and/or top managers of the focal companies. To facilitate the conversion of internal marketing activities into factors of performance improvement, in general (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2014), and the financial component, in particular (Kirca, 2011), standard interviews aimed to collect personal perspectives regarding the involvement of the interviewed in the organisation and different contributions to the operational results by internal marketing practices as mechanisms of interaction with clients, conducive to their satisfaction and loyalty.

Thus, some management activities carried out in an organisation, such as reward systems, directly

impact the marketing behaviours of the employees. Consequently, activities that are based on a market orientation concept are a major determinant of organisational success (Piercy et al., 2002; Lings & Greenley, 2010). Besides, the orientation to the internal market is important for the development and support of the market orientation. People, processes and policies must be aligned to create superior value for the organisation's relationship with the final client. It must be considered that the reinforcement of client-oriented behaviours is the key to the internal marketing, which in turn translates into increased customer satisfaction and business performance (Conduit & Mavondo, 2001; Rodrigues & Pinho, 2010; Shiu & Yu, 2010; Ceric et al., 2016).

For the interviewees, internal marketing was identified as a common practice in most companies, because the organisational concern for employees as internal customers is transversal and based on the broad concept that all employees and all departments of a company are suppliers and internal customers of each other (Lukas & Maignan, 1996).

In the perspective of the respondents, work should be conceptually interpreted as a product beyond employment. In their opinion, companies should create jobs that incorporate various aspects that allow attracting and retaining the workforce (Greene et al., 1994; Vasconcelos, 2008). This can be achieved by constant care for the well-being of individuals, trying to accommodate different employee needs fostering the understanding of the importance of the performed tasks.

Internal market orientation is, therefore, a prerequisite for satisfying customer wishes and needs, which obviously involves the identification and satisfaction of employee wants and needs (Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009).

The analysed organisations made sure they provided the necessary support to achieve good performance in the execution of tasks, which leads to a well-developed sense of belonging to the organisation. The respondents mentioned that “...the company has acceptably modern facilities, ... well cared for and always spotless ...”, whereas there is a constant “... concern of the staff so that personal identification can be verified in the professional context”, that “...the relationship between the colleagues and their leaders is good, constituting a good way of building the team spirit and the company itself”, the “...work environment is the right one, which allows the right interaction...” and that “there is capacity to positively disagree ...”.

A favourable understanding of the way in which the relationship between companies and their employees takes place is clearly important, as there is always a concern to reconcile the interests of both parties so that the needs of each of them could be better adjusted.

The attitudes and behaviours demonstrated by the working force determine the relational quality perceived by the external customer (Rifai, 2005) and, consequently, their degree of satisfaction. Therefore, it is essential to motivate employees to adopt a marketing perspective, in a sense to promote their attitudes and, thus, to achieve organisational success in the external market (Tortosa et al., 2009).

The satisfaction rates that have been identified in various focal companies are factors that promote the internal organisational environment with immediate and specific implications to the management of the organisation, highlighting the comparative qualities which give them an operational advantage in the general business environment.

Considering the dual relational concept of internal marketing and performance, the analysed companies aim to promote the development of employee skills that contribute to the policies applied to approached external markets. Market orientation is an external relational tool and, consequently, an added value that makes a long-term contribution to organisational success (Deshpandé & Farley, 1998).

Works by Jaakkola et al. (2010), Davis et al. (2010) and Silva (2011) were used to identify a set of economic-financial indicators for the analysis of the performance conditions of the analysed companies to discern the contribution that can be materialised.

Generally, and by interpreting the values considered and provided by the focal companies, in particular, balance sheets designated by IES (Informação Empresarial Simplificada – simplified business information¹), it is possible to look at a set of elements that provide some indication about their management in economic and financial terms as well as their performance.

¹ The IES is delivered by companies by filling single forms approved by Ordinance No 208 of 16 February 2007, with the changes introduced by Ordinance No 8 of 3 January 2008, Ordinance No 64-A of 3 February 2011 and Ordinance No 26 of 27 January 2012. The forms are submitted electronically to the Portuguese Ministry of Finance as a single access point, on the same terms as the current Annual Declaration, Model 22.

From the outset, after a continuous decrease up to 2015, the volume of sales reversed in all companies in the first quarter of 2016, which is significant, given the economic circumstances of the time.

Net results of each company also improved because of the sales evolution, from mostly negative values to growths ranging from 43% to 122%, year on year, from the first quarter of 2015 to the first quarter of 2016.

It should be noted that in all companies, equity – the net value of company assets, i.e. the difference between assets and liabilities or everything the company owns and owes to third parties, which reflects the value of corporate assets – shows an average growth rate of 4.2% from 2014 to 2015, which indicates good levels of organisational performance.

The analysis of the indicator of the average financial autonomy for the five companies revealed a decrease between 2014 and 2015. It can be justified by the economic environment in the country at the time.

Other ratios demonstrated an increase in the net profitability of sales, which is obtained from the net margin after the deduction of all charges. Meanwhile, almost all companies underwent a decline in the operational profitability, which strongly depends on the sector of activity. The need for financing during 2013–2015 suggests the need to reconsider high charges.

However, all companies performed well and had good indicators, showing an interesting evolution, especially considering the conjunctural moment experienced by most Portuguese companies.

In general, the most dissonant indicator in the good performance of companies reflects a reversal in the operational profitability, which can be explained by the impact of the general conditions in their sector of activity as well as the need to reformulate the production model to counteract the economic downturn.

Tab. 2 provides a snapshot of the results contrasted with the literature in the field.

CONCLUSIONS

In companies, the identification of expressly encouraged attitudes towards internal relations depends on a set of constraints that contribute to the conceptualisation of the constructs studied in this work. The identification of orientation for a given variable can be improved, but the analysed concepts should not be entirely neglected in any of the observed organisations.

To the extent that the companies in the sample have different characteristics, their relational operations are conditioned by their diversity, although the analysed concepts are always intelligible in what is the organisation's way of proceeding.

In all the analysed companies, it is possible to identify the organisational will, clearer and more structured in some cases than others, what is meant when considering their DNA, in the transmission of a strategic focus sustained in the generalised diffusion of an internal model which aims to meet the needs of employees as a way to achieve a better individual performance and thus ensure greater adherence to the organisational designation.

Therefore, in the analysed companies, it is possible to identify the use of more or less structured organisational models of internal marketing that lead to the well-being of employees and low staff turnover, allowing to reach the desired market orientation.

The understanding of these conditions established by the organisations allows the availability of high-quality products to the clients, thus contributing to the desired market orientation. This increases and strengthens the quality of the external relationship

Tab. 2. Findings of the previous studies compared to present results

| PAST STUDIES | PREVIOUS STUDY FINDINGS | PRESENT STUDY RESULTS |
|--|---|--|
| Crick, 2003; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003 | internal marketing is a way to promote the company and its products to its employees, generating involvement and commitment | internal marketing is identified as a common practice in most companies and a cross-organisational concern that employees are understood as internal customers |
| Gray et al., 2002; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Lings & Greenley, 2005, 2010 | the internal marketing concept focuses on internal management mechanisms applied to employees and conducive to organisational performance | companies consider work as a product beyond employment; it is identified through constant care for the well-being of an individual |

| PAST STUDIES | PREVIOUS STUDY FINDINGS | PRESENT STUDY RESULTS |
|---|---|---|
| Lings & Greenley, 2005 | the proper practice of internal marketing is expected to be the source of improved performance | organisations made sure they provided the necessary support to achieve good performance in the execution of tasks, which leads to a well-developed sense of belonging to the organisation and a better external relationship |
| Gounaris, 2006; Chow, 2015 | the company's focus, as an economic unit of production, must pass to its exterior, in the perspective of customer satisfaction | a favourable understanding can be verified as to the way in which the relationship with employees takes place, reflected in the concern to reconcile the interests of both internal and external parts |
| Malik et al., 2010 | the internal marketing orientation is essential for business success | the individual satisfaction rates identified in the focal companies are factors that promote an internal organisational environment with immediate and specific implications in the management of the organisation, which gives them an operational advantage in the general business environment |
| Jungsun et al., 2016 | there is a need for internal marketing activities so that final delivery of what is market-visible is fully consistent with the promise previously made by business orientation | considering the double relational concept of internal marketing and performance, the analysed companies aim to promote the development of client-focused relationship skills within their employees |
| Lings & Greenley, 2010; Javadein et al., 2011 | an internal marketing operation produces value for external customers | in all the analysed companies, it is possible to identify the organisational will, clearer and more structured in some cases than in others, in the transmission of a strategic focus based on the generalised diffusion of an internal model that intends to meet the generalised needs of employees and consequently convey value to the customer |
| Franco et al., 2001; Rodrigues, 2004; Kirca, 2011 | the internal marketing activities meet the needs and the creation of value for the consumer | in the analysed companies, it is possible to identify the use of more or less structured organisational models of internal marketing that lead to the well-being of employees and low staff turnover, allowing to reach the desired market orientation |
| Jungsun et al., 2016 | customer satisfaction should be based on all the organisation's achievements with a direct influence on the final performance of the offer | all companies had: a positive evolution of the sales volume; net results also improved; equity, the value of corporate assets, showed an average growth rate of 4.2% from 2014 to 2015, which indicates good levels of organisational performance; net profitability of sales increased; (there was a decrease in the operational profitability, which heavily depends on the sector of activity) |
| Farrell, 2000; Kwon & Hu, 2000; Schneider et al., 2003; Rodrigues, 2004; Lings & Greenley, 2010 | most of the studies that have already been done provide evidence that employee attitudes are related to organisational performance, demonstrating that market orientation is related to employee attitudes and behaviours | it can be verified that all companies performed well and had good indicators, showing an interesting evolution, especially considering the conjectural moment experienced by the majority of the Portuguese companies during the execution of the study |
| Lings & Greenley, 2005 | it has already been shown that the internal marketing orientation has a positive impact: (i) customer satisfaction and (ii) competitive positioning of the organisation | the positive evolution of business indicators of the analysed companies was demonstrated in combination with the practised internal marketing |
| Kaur, Sharma & Seli, 2010; Theodoridis & Panigyrakis, 2010 | internal marketing orientation contributes to market orientation | the identified conditions of internal marketing practice and internal marketing orientation enshrined by the analysed organisations, allowing the availability of high-quality products to the clients, thus contributing to the desired market orientation and its good performance |
| Shiu & Yu, 2010; Jungsun et al., 2016 | financial capital no longer perceived as the key factor for success and replaced by human capital in order to achieve better organisational performance | there is a general trend towards the appreciation of employees as a better way to satisfy customers |

(Rodrigues & Pinho, 2010), such as in the same operating line, also facilitating more controlled production costs, in a sales orientation to the market loyalty (Zhou & Li, 2007). In turn, this allows better positioning to adequately meet various customer needs (Matsuno et al., 2002).

The results obtained in this exploratory research are in line with the reviewed literature regarding the effect of the internal marketing behaviours on the market orientation and the consequent level of performance, thus showing consistency and providing credibility to its content.

However, research efforts in this field should be continued considering the size of an analysed business. A qualitative exploratory investigation allows a relativised interpretation of the value of the considered variables, yet presents some limitations that should lead to further investigations. Thus, quantitative research is suggested to confirm the relationship between different analysed variables and contribute to more robust results.

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