THE EFFECT OF INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR AND STRATEGIC FLEXIBILITY ON BUSINESS INNOVATIVENESS: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, innovative work behavior (IWB) has been examined as an important factor contributing to a firm's competitive advantage with the realization that innovation occurs as a result of the successful implementation of new and useful creative ideas offered by employees. In this research we analyze the relationship between innovative work behavior and business innovativeness and also the mediating role of strategic flexibility on this relationship. The analysis of the study was carried out by collecting data from 309 participants whose companies operating in the Marmara Region of Turkey. Results show that innovative work behavior and strategic flexibility affect business innovativeness and strategic flexibility partially mediates the relationship between IWB and business innovativeness.

Keywords: *Innovative Work Behavior, Innovative Behavior, Strategic Flexibility, Business Innovativeness*

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation has become one the most important factors for being successful for many companies operating in different industries today. As far as responding to the fast changing demands and needs of customers around the world, which are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to predict; it has become very important to be able to make the necessary innovative moves at the right time. For this, besides catching the technological transformations required for the management function to act with a strategic point of view and for all parts of the whole organization to operate effectively and efficiently; managers also need to provide their employees an innovative work environment and climate for the sustainability of this success. In these days, as the effect of globalization is becoming more evident, one of the areas where the effects are felt the most is undoubtedly in the field of economy. The pressure of global competitiveness on companies, which are the building blocks and main players of the economy for each country, forces them to produce innovative products and services. Along with the changing demand structure, advances in information technologies and automation have an effect that accelerates innovation, which is the main source of technological transformation.

According to Schilling (2008), more than a third of the sales and profits of many companies in different industries are based on the products they have developed in the last five years. Westerman et al. (2014) identified the characteristics of firms that can realize digital transformation as a result of the interviews by 150 managers from 50 countries. According to this study, these characteristics are digital capabilities such as technological infrastructure systems and employees that are leaning to innovative thinking and leadership skills to manage these talents in the most effective way. Again in this research, it is stated that the companies that are in the best position in both skills, which are called 'digital masteries', are 26% more profitable than their competitors.

As stated above, the concept of innovation had a power that has deeply affected companies for the last 20-30 years, and this effect still continues. Parallel to this, the number of studies investigating the concepts such as innovative perspective and technological innovation has increased in the academic literature (Jong & Hartog, 2010). The success of the investments made by the senior management for technological innovations cannot be considered independently of the awareness, knowledge, perspectives, motivations and practice of the employees. For the continuity of success in this area, having strategic flexibility that will encourage employees to produce creative ideas and having an innovative climate in which these ideas can be applied come to the fore. In this sense, 'innovative work behavior' stands out as a relatively new

concept and can be expressed as following: “employees directly or indirectly participation in the activities and behaviors of creating, presenting or implementing ideas, processes, products, procedures that are new to the units within the organization” (De Spiegelaere et al., 2012). This concept enables employees to participate in the birth of innovative ideas and the implementation of these ideas rather than relying only on their routine activities (Kör, B., 2015).

From this point of view, it is possible to express the problem statement of this study: “How is the innovative work behavior in organizations affected by the innovative climate and strategic flexibility?”. Although the number of studies including concepts such as innovation is high in the literature, the lack of studies examining innovative work behavior in terms of various organizational climates and strategic flexibility led us to examine this study problem. It is also possible to say that the number of comprehensive studies on the concept of 'innovative work behavior' is relatively low. Therefore, we aim to contribute to the literature by investigating these effects.

In this paper, firstly a detailed analysis of the literature review is covered. Then the methodology of the research is being explained, followed by the empirical analysis. After that, we show the results of the analysis. Lastly in the conclusion section, we discuss what we found and interpret our results, give managerial implications, suggestions for future research and the limitations of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovative Work Behavior and Business Innovativeness

Innovative work behavior has been examined as an important factor contributing to a firm’s competitive advantage with the realization that innovation occurs as a result of the successful implementation of new and useful creative ideas offered by employees (Purc & Laguna, 2017). It refers to the conscious presentation of new and useful ideas as well as the behaviors needed for idea development, initiation and implementation in order to increase the innovative performance of employees in an organization (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007). This concept, which is associated with many positive outcomes at the individual and organizational level (Anderson et al., 2014; Hammond et al., 2011; Janssen, 2003), is mainly based on inter-connectedness rather than personal interests such as individual performance, individual creativity or individual innovation. Inter-connectedness expresses the fact that an employee in a company has ties with other elements of the system, such as other employees and managers (Afsar & Badir, 2017), processes etc.

Innovative work behavior has not been a concept that has been researched only on the production sector or technology-oriented company employees; it has also been examined in the service sector. As a result of innovative work behavior, a concretively new product may emerge in a technology company; in an enterprise operating in the service sector for example, creative solutions to the customer's needs, problems or complaints can also be evaluated within the scope of innovative work behavior (Michael et al., 2011). It is also related to the concept of 'intrapreneurship', which expresses entrepreneurial activities within a company (Lukes & Stephan, 2017) and constitutes a micro basis for organizational innovativeness (Felin et al., 2015).

Companies are increasingly establishing corporate incubators and similar models to empower employees' innovation, to provide an opportunity to innovate independently of company constraints and to benefit from the entrepreneurial spirit of start-ups. All these developments, as a complex behavior involving both the generation and implementation of new ideas in enterprises, aim to encourage the emergence of new independent business units in order to positively affect the innovative work behavior of their employees, and also shape the innovative climate within the company (Kruft et al., 2018).

Innovation is inherently a social phenomenon; because it requires the person who has a new idea to influence and persuade other people why it is useful and valuable and why it should be put into practice; needs the use and help of others to bring the idea to life. From this point of view, as a starting point of employee-driven innovation, innovative work behavior is closely interrelated to an organization’s level of flexibility. In their study, Binard and Pohl (2013) confirmed that cognitive flexibility is an antecedent of innovative behavior. And Qi et al. (2021) found that the level of innovative employee behaviour is higher when the organizational supply for flexible work fits their needs and the organizational demand for flexible work fits their ability. Anser et al. (2022) revealed that functional flexibility (FF) significantly affects IWB in SME’s workers. The findings also reveal that functional flexibility (FF) acts as a mediator between

knowledge sharing (KS) and IWB link. Lastly, Jiang et al. (2023) states that flexible work arrangements (FWA) is positively related to knowledge employees' innovation behavior.

With this background, we propose that the more employees are able to express innovative work behaviors, the more strategically flexible the work environment will be. Therefore, we set our first hypothesis as follow;

H_1: Innovative work behavior has a positive effect on strategic flexibility

H_2: Innovative work behavior has a positive effect on business innovativeness

Strategic Flexibility And Business Innovativeness

Strategic flexibility, which is stated to be an important dynamic capability in the academic literature (Teece et al., 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), helps firms reallocate their resources according to the changing needs and break existing operational routines (Zhou & Wu, 2010). In this way, it is possible to say that a successful strategic flexibility has a positive effect on organizational creativity, technological capability, innovative climate and innovativeness of the enterprise.

In the literature, the definitions of strategic flexibility are generally expressed through the opposition of stability and constancy. But just as Volberda (1996) describes as the paradox of flexibility, flexibility without a certain level of stability can cause chaos. Again, according to Weick (1982), in a fully flexible institution; it will be almost impossible to maintain organizational identity and sense of continuity. For this reason, it is necessary to maintain a certain level of stability in order to provide control in the organization and to develop an organizational identity, corporate culture and climate. Too much or too little flexibility in a firm will cause instability. From this point of view, it can be concluded that the level of stability that should be in balance in enterprises; it should be in the middle between rigidity and overreaction (Volberda, 1996).

One of the most important obstacles to successful strategic flexibility can be expressed with the concept of organizational inertia. Organizational inertia can prevail in organizations over time, with firms insisting on their current processes and policies which make it difficult to adapt to the changing external environment, and with the very specific, religious implementation of corporate routines in order to achieve reliable results. If these routines, which create automatic reactions based on past experiences, are very dominant in an enterprise, it begins to create resistance to change. It is undoubtedly impossible for companies to survive for a long time if they are not strategically flexible. In their study, Ritter-Hayashi (2020) investigated how labor flexibility can retain firm innovativeness in times of downsizing and found that even in downsizing process, labor flexibility allows firms to remain innovative. Besides, De Spiegelaere et al. (2014) found a positive relation between different forms of (unlike contractual and financial flexibility) functional flexibility and both employee-driven innovation (EDI) and organizational innovation. Therefore, we set our third hypothesis as follow;

H_3: Strategic flexibility has a positive effect on business innovativeness

Mediation Effect Of Strategic Flexibility

Although flexibility has critical importance for the participation of employees in innovation-related activities; however, this does not mean that participation of employees in innovation- related activities occurs automatically (Anser et. Al., 2022). Yasir and Majid (2020) found that employee functional flexibility (FF) fully mediates the relationship between high-involvement human resource management (HI HRM) practices and IWB. Anser et al. (2022) also found that functional flexibility (FF) acts as a mediator between knowledge sharing (KS) and IWB link. Wojtczuk-Turek and Turek (2015) analyzed the relationship between human resource flexibility (HRF), individual flexibility and IWB and found the mediation role of psychological capital on the relationship between human resource flexibility (HRF) and IWB.

Flexibility of the workplace is considered one of the important mechanisms for business innovativeness but not adequate to stimulate employees for IWB significantly. To highlight this research gap, we include strategic flexibility as a mediator for this relationship. We think that flexibility acts as a bridge between IWB and business innovativeness, because an organization's innovativeness depends on the competencies

of its members (Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005). How flexible the work environment is an important dimension to facilitate innovative thinking and acting.

H_4: Strategic flexibility has a mediating role of the relationship between innovative work behavior and business innovativeness

In this research we analyze the relationship between innovative work behavior and business innovativeness and also the mediating role of strategic flexibility on this relationship. The research model of this study is shown below:

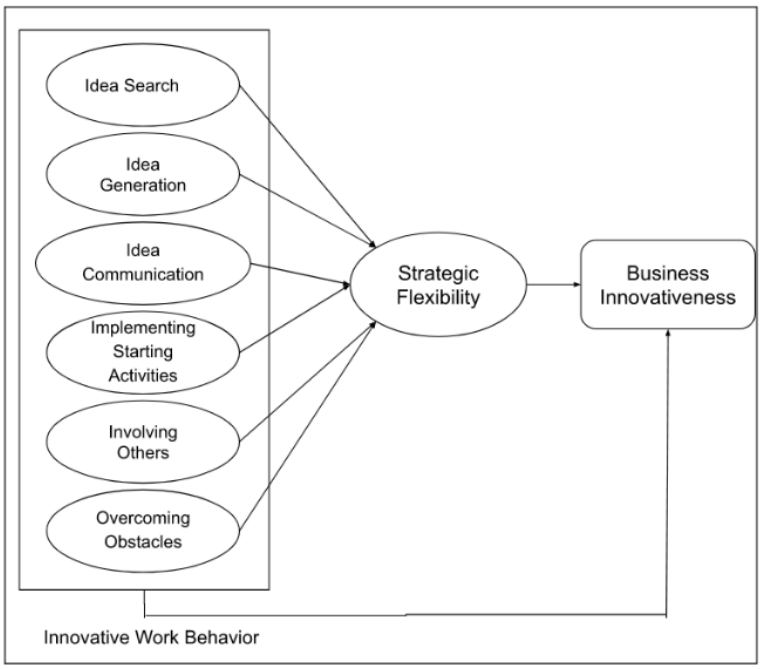

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

METHODOLOGY

Research Sample and Data Collection

In this research, we collected data from employers & employees in (both manufacturing and service) companies that are operating in Marmara Region of Turkey. The reason why we focused only on this region is the fact that it covers most of the economic activities of Turkey by itself. As shown in Table 1, after elimination of some data with missing values, we reached 309 participants; which 45% is female and 55% is male. 55% of the participants are graduate from a university; while 31% has a master degree. 48% of the sample consists of middle and bottom level managers, 38% white collar employees and 14% senior managers & employers. When we look at the activity level of the companies, we see that a majority of companies (with 62%) are operating in international level and 58% have an R&D department.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Firms & Participants

Gender		***Firm Activity Level***	
Female	45%	Regional	11%
Male	55%	National	27%
		International	62%
Education Level		***Status***	
High School	4%	Empoyer	6%
College	8%	Senior Manager	8%
Graduate	55%	Mid & Bottom-level Manager	48%
Master	31%	White-Collar	38%
PhD	2%		

Measures

The process of determining which scales to be used in the study was carried out meticulously. First of all, articles published in 'Web of Science' which is one of the databases with the highest scientific validity and validity in academic literature, were examined in terms of content quality. Then, the articles containing the survey questions of our variables in this study were filtered and then the most appropriate ones in terms of validity, reliability and method were decided.

In this study, Lukes and Stephan's (2017) *'innovative work behavior'* scale consisting of six dimensions and 20 questions was used. This scale was preferred not only because it is a current study, but also because it was applied in four different countries instead of a single country, ensuring cross-cultural validation. Besides, Pala and Turan (2020) stated that this scale is a valid and reliable measurement tool for Turkey as well. Six dimensions of the scale are as follows; idea generation, idea search, idea communication, implementation starting activities, involving others and overcoming obstacles.

Questions about *strategic flexibility* were formed from Zhou and Wu's article published in Strategic Management Journal in 2010. This scale, adapted by Zhou and Wu on Sanchez's work in 1995, consists of two dimensions, each consisting of three questions. The dimensions are resource allocation flexibility and coordination flexibility.

Business innovativeness scale was obtained from the article published by Akgün et al. in 2014 which is adapted from the work of Wang and Ahmed (2004). This scale consists of four questions and suitable for using in Turkish version (Akgün et al., 2014).

Factor Analysis And Correlations

Exploratory factor analysis has been made by using Principal Component Analyses with Varimax rotation in order to observe whether variables theoretically loaded together or not. Besides reliability values were calculated. We used SPSS Package Programme to make the analysis.

Table 2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Items	Factor Loadings 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cronbach's Alpha
1- Strategic Flexibility	St_Flex_2	0,863							0,892
	St_Flex_1	0,818							
	St_Flex_3	0,713							
	St_Flex_6	0,656							
	St_Flex_4	0,626							
2 Innovative Work Behavor Overcoming	IWB_OO_20		0,806						0,907
	IWB_OO_19		0,780						
	IWB_OO_18		0,719						
	IWB_OO_17		0,682						
3 Firm Innovativeness	Firm_Inn_2			0,801					0,906
	Firm_Inn_3			0,761					
	Firm_Inn_1			0,730					
	Firm_Inn_4			0,726					
4 - IWB Involving Others	IWB_IO_15				0,813				0,873
	IWB_IO_14				0,773				
	IWB_IO_16				0,755				
5 - IWB Idea Communication	IWB_IC_7					0,766			0,815
	IWB_IC_8					0,690			
6 - IWB Idea Generation	IWB_IG_3						0,742		0,832
	IWB_IG_4						0,543		
7 - IWB Implem. Starting Act.	IWB_ISA_12							0,605	0,863
	IWB_ISA_13							0,527	
Variance Explained (%)		16,26	15,64	14,99	13,79	8,74	6,38	5,00	
Total Variance Explained (%): 80,79 KMO: 0,942									

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy calculated to see whether the data set is suitable for factor analysis. KMO in this research is 0.942 which is above of the desired result of 0.50 (Field, 2009). Item loadings that are below 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010) has been extracted from the analysis, for this reason 'idea search' dimension of innovative work behavior has been extracted completely. In addition, Cronbach's alpha values calculated to see if the factors are reliable and have internal consistency, or not. As it can be seen from the table, values are higher than 0.70 (Field, 2009), in between 0,815 - 0,907. Lastly total variance explained is 80,79% for this research.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.ST_FLEX	1						
2.IWB_OO	.601**	1					
3.IWB_IO	.501**	.617**	1				
4.IWB_IC	.514**	.598**	.640**	1			
5.IWB_IG	.515**	.645**	.621**	.694**	1		
6.IWB_ISA	.608**	.744**	.681**	.663**	.681**	1	
7.FIRM_INN	.658**	.640**	.585**	.573**	.623**	.648**	1
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level							

According to the results of the correlation analysis, factor variables have positive and significant relationships (Table 3). Therefore, it can be asserted that research variables are sufficiently related to each other so they can be interpreted. According to the table, strategic flexibility has a high correlation with firm innovativeness.

RESULTS

We conducted regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The results are shown in the table below. According to the Model 1, innovative work behavior has a positive effect on strategic flexibility (B; 644***, Adjusted R^2: ,413, Sig: ,001) and business innovativeness (B; 721***, Adjusted R^2: ,518, Sig: ,001) which supports our H_1 and H_2. Results also show that H_3 is supported too, representing strategic flexibility has a positive effect on business innovativeness (B; 658***, Adjusted R^2: ,431, Sig: ,001).

Table 4. Regression Analysis

	Independant Variables	Dependant Variables			
		Strategic Flexibility		Business Innovativeness	
Model 1	IWB	0.644***	F:217.90*** Adj R2: 0.413	0.721***	F: 331.62*** Adj. R2: 518
	IWB_OO	0.278***		0.239***	
	IWB_IO	0.053		0.131*	
	IWB_IC	0.106	F: 46.153*** Adj. R2: 0.423	0.081	F: 66.804*** Adj. R2: 0.516
	IWB_IG	0.053		0.202***	
	IWB_ISA	0.258***		0.189**	
	Strategic Flexibility			0.658***	F: 234.539*** Adj. R2: 0.431
Model 2				Business Innovativeness	
	IWB			0.507***	F: 214.35*** Adj. R2: 0.581
	Strategic Flexibility			0.331***	
	IWB_OO			0.147*	
	IWB_IO			0.113*	
	IWB_IC			0.045	
	IWB_IG			0.185**	F: 71.463*** Adj. R2: 0.579
	IWB_ISA			0.103	
	Strategic Flexibility			0.332***	

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Model 2 represents the mediation analysis, done by Baron and Kenny (1986) approach, of strategic flexibility on the relationship between innovative work behavior and business innovativeness. When we add strategic flexibility into the model, the effect of innovative work behavior on business innovativeness did not disappear completely; however, we can see that it decreased the effect. For this reason, H_4 is partially supported.

CONCLUSION

Even though number of studies examining innovative work behavior increase recently, there is not many studies focusing on this subject together with strategic flexibility of the work environment and business innovativeness in general. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by detailed empirical research.

The findings provide some practical implications for managers and practitioners. This study suggests that managers should increase business innovativeness by creating a work environment that is flexible enough to make a space for creative thinking and acting innovatively. According to Yasir and Majid (2020): "The IWB of employees can only be assured when the organizations adopt a holistic approach towards employee's development. Otherwise, the achievement of the targets of innovative behavior of employee's in not possible".

According to Quatro (2004), employees who feel themselves as important, valuable and meaningful members of the organization respond with higher levels of discretionary behavior, which express the voluntary behavior of employees. In this way, it would not be wrong to consider innovative work behavior as a behavior that is partly at the discretion of the employees (Afsar & Badir, 2017). An employee who has an innovative idea can only take action when she/he feels the necessary social support to bring the idea to life. Starting from here; we can say that there is a need for a flexible environment in almost every organization in order to encourage employees to think and act innovatively, in particular, to increase the innovative performance of the entire organization in general. Employees' inability to feel a sense of self-worth, meaning, mutual interaction, interdependence and common purpose constitutes the main barriers to innovation in a workplace.

In today's world, extreme competition is a reality of the business world. This means while institutions should be able to respond and adapt to changes in the external environment very quickly (i.e., they should be flexible enough to realize and act on them); on the other hand, they need to have strong management skills to control it internally as well. At this point, it is possible to say that the word of *'balance'* constitutes one of the most fundamental elements in achieving success in strategic flexibility.

Due to the time and availability issues, data is only collected from companies that are operating in Marmara Region of Turkey which constitutes a limitation. For further researches, we suggest to expand this research by adding other flexibility factors as well.

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