

Dissertation process and some insights from the field of data-based decision-making: interviews of Aino Kianto and Henri Hussinki

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This short essay will discuss the dissertation process of Henri Hussinki (néé Inkinen). The text is based on insights gathered in interviews of Henri Hussinki and his supervisor, Aino Kianto. In 2013, Henri was selected to take part in a research project called "Intellectual Capital and Value Creation" on the basis of his master's thesis. The project included an exploration of the dynamics between intangible intellectual capital (IC) and knowledge management practices (KMp). The main research objective in the dissertation was the following: "What is the relationship between intellectual capital, knowledge management practices and firm performance?" (Inkinen, 2016, p.18). His main task as a PhD researcher for the project was to explore the literature related to the two topics and gather data. In the end, the sample consisted from answers of 262 companies with over 100 employees gathered via a questionnaire that was developed based on literature review insights. To further check the validity of the survey instrument, he utilized expert panels who gave feedback on the execution.

The dissertation was compiled by four peer-reviewed first-author articles and one conference publication. Although the dissertation was finished by 2016, many of the articles were published in peer-reviewed papers only in the same year or later. The first one was a literature review on intellectual capital and firm performance, published in July of 2015, and the next literature on knowledge management practices review was published in April of 2016. Both of the literature reviews have received a considerable number of citations (Google Scholar): the first one 501 and the second 489.

The two empirical studies connecting the dots between intellectual capital and firm performance and in turn, knowledge management practices and firm performance were published around the same time although the literature reviews had been conducted considerably earlier than the empirical explorations. The article on connections between IC and firm performance was published as a conference paper in June 2014 (Inkinen et al.), while the KMp article was published in a peer reviewed journal in October of 2015 (Inkinen et al., 2015). The final review combining the two viewpoints (IC&KMp) was finally published in 2017 (Hussinki et al., 2017), after he had changed his last name to Hussinki and defended his dissertation in July of 2016. That article, too, has received widespread recognition with 330 citations.

The scheduling of the articles reveals that the main bulk of the work related to the literature review and the data gathering had been done early on in the project, already in 2013 and 2014. The writing and publishing process took the next two to three years.

The timeline of Henri Hussinki somewhat corresponds to the sample dissertation timeline offered by Roberts (2010, p.200). She suggests that the first half-year of the dissertation

process is reserved for selecting the thesis advisors and committee. After the change of the year, in January or February the study proposal starts to take form. Simultaneously, literature review and choices of methodology start to solidify, and they should be turned into readily available texts that might be utilized in articles. By the mid-to late of year 2 data gathering might take place. Analysis takes place right at the onset of the next year and the writing of the empirical articles begins. For example, in our case, the new doctoral students who started in September of 2023, we might see articles taking form in early 2025, after which they still need to be published.

In Henri's case, the first half year included already a lot of the actual literature review work since inclusion in the project made selections of committee members and establishment of supportive structures rather straightforward. He conducted data gathering swiftly after starting the project, which allowed him to finish the dissertation only in three years, when usually at least four are needed.

While his doctoral thesis successfully takes the IC and Kmp literatures and compiles the two literatures together, it relies on a set of data which might not be sufficient to answer the research question fully. Only a small number of companies to whom the survey was sent answered it. That makes selection bias a possible limitation to the generalizability of the implications of the study. Additionally, the Kmp-portion addresses *innovation performance* (self-reported), while IC practices are correlated with *market performance*, which was a researcher-compiled measure comparing the company to its competitors. The two different measures of firm performance with different methodologies make the end results close to incomparable. The last article addresses these problematics by dividing the firms according to their IC level, Kmp level, innovation performance and market performance. The choices implicit in the segmenting process are not fully addressed. In conclusion, the thesis succeeds in answering the research objective, but the utilization of two different dependent variables confounds the findings. I would like to see a repeat usage of the same questionnaire and how the results compare to Inkinen (2016) results.

Moving onto the key takeaways from the interviews, they were for the most part centered around the most important things to consider once creating a dissertation of one's own. Henri and Aino shared the same key insight: one must carefully select the research gap. Both of them seemed worried that the topic of data-based decision making, at least in the Knowledge Management & Intellectual Capital traditions had lost a lot of its interest. While they did not say it outright to my face, that was the impression I had. I do not disagree. When searching the topics on Google Scholar, a lot of the most cited articles and the discussion is centered around the turn of the millenium. If there is interesting research that studies data-induced processes in the organization and their implications for performance, it can be found under some different name. I need to embark on a process to find what has been studied and make sure not to repeat old findings. And find a research question that bears some immediacy today.

Another point that Henri made, was to make sure to finish the dissertation on time but with sufficient quality. When I asked him if there was something he would do differently if he had

the chance, he said he would aim higher on the academic ladder. Search for topics in higher ranking journals and adapt his research interest to that. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of making progress and not getting stuck on side projects.

With Aino, on the other hand, our discussion quickly switched from the research process to the state of research in her field. I had asked a question regarding the apparent lack of discussion between different research fields that all deal with managerial cognition, organization's information processing and data-based decision making. She was intrigued by my question, as she had not noticed such a gap before and mentioned that we might collaborate on something in the future. While I was happy to hear that my initial impression might have been both correct and intriguing enough to wake an interest of a seasoned professor, I could not help but wonder if the research tradition they focused on in LUT was relevant enough considering that its terminology is not often addressed in the highest-ranking journals.

All of these interactions caused me to ask a lot of questions regarding how to position myself in the academic community and how to find the most interesting and relevant questions to answer in my future dissertation. I will be glad to read some more and discuss with some experienced academics to come to some level of clarity on these issues.

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