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Unit 419

Information Pack

Understanding Work in Contemporary Society

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INTRODUCTION

Organisations today find themselves operating in an environment that is quick changing. The contemporary society right now features great technological advances and innovations, longer average life spans in people, higher levels of literacy and diversification. The process of analysing these changes and modifying the way that the organisation reacts to them is known as business strategy.

'Strategy is the direction and scope of an organisation over the long term, which achieves advantage in a changing environment through its configuration of resources and competences'

(Johnson et al, 2009)

This information pack will break down strategic processes that will allow you to identify internal and external factors within the environment that could have an impact on your organisation. It will provide you with the knowledge to form an assessment on the organisation, the functions of an organisation and the wider business environments in which organisations operate. Finally, understanding how the strengths and weaknesses of the different types of organisations, their structure and how they operate can provide a competitive advantage.

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GUIDANCE

This document is prepared to break the unit material down into bite size chunks. You will see the learning outcomes above treated in their own sections. Therein you will encounter the following structures;

Purpose

Explains *why* you need to study the current section of material. Quite often learners are put off by material which does not initially seem to be relevant to a topic or profession. Once you understand the importance of new learning or theory you will embrace the concepts more readily.

Theory

Conveys new material to you in a straightforward fashion. To support the treatments in this section you are strongly advised to follow the given hyperlinks, which may be useful documents or applications on the web.

Example

The examples/worked examples are presented in a knowledge-building order. Make sure you follow them all through. If you are feeling confident then you might like to treat an example as a question, in which case cover it up and have a go yourself. Many of the examples given resemble assignment questions which will come your way, so follow them through diligently.

Question

Questions should not be avoided if you are determined to learn. Please do take the time to tackle each of the given questions, in the order in which they are presented. The order is important, as further knowledge and confidence is built upon previous knowledge and confidence. As an Online Learner it is important that the answers to questions are immediately available to you. Contact your Unit Tutor if you need help.

Challenge

You can really cement your new knowledge by undertaking the challenges. A challenge could be to download software and perform an exercise. An alternative challenge might involve a practical activity or other form of research.

Video

Videos on the web can be very useful supplements to your distance learning efforts. Wherever an online video(s) will help you then it will be hyperlinked at the appropriate point.

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Defining a Contemporary Society

Collins Dictionary defines contemporary as:

'Contemporary things are modern and relate to the present time'

And Cambridge dictionary defines society as:

'A large group of people who live together in an organised way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done. All the people in a country, or in several countries can be referred to as a society'.

According to social and political scientist's contemporary society can be characterised in three ways:

- The pace and depth of the evolution of human ways of life, determined by technological innovation.
- Increasing human interconnection through a network of relationships that is progressively covering the whole planet.
- The scale of anthropological and ecological transformation due to the interaction between evolutionary factors (social, cultural, economic, and technological) has no historical precedent.

Considering the way we live now compared to how we lived a century ago, it is hard to imagine how we could ever go back to living without electricity or more recently the internet. Below are some examples of major changes that irreversibly transformed our daily lives:

- **Communication Technology**- The world population has several "passive" (broadcasting) communication technologies (radio, television) that cover the whole globe. A large portion of the population uses "active" communication technologies (telephone, internet). Internet connections are expanding rapidly: in 2004 there were 140 Internet users every 1000 inhabitants (according to data from the "International Communication Union"). The spread of information and communication technologies (ICT) is remodelling the material fundamentals of society. The sociologist Castells believes that these technologies have started a revolution of the productive structures of society and of daily life.

- **Life expectancy**- In 1960, the average life expectancy of the world population was 50 years. Forty-five years later, in 2004, life expectancy had improved by over 30% to 67 years. Improvements in health care and the reduction in child mortality have led to a jump forward in middle-income countries, where life expectancy is now over 70 years. In high-income countries life expectancy is now over 80 years, extending well beyond the traditional length of working life, causing social and economic problems.

- **Improvement in life conditions**- The UN estimates that, at the beginning of the 20th century, about 60% of the world population lived in conditions of extreme poverty. In 1981, 40% of the world population lived extreme poverty. In 2001, the percentage had been halved to 20%. Several developing countries, in Sub-Saharan Africa, still suffer from social and economic backwardness, but life conditions have significantly improved in most regions of the world, in particular in Asia.

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- **Literacy and gender equality**- The ability to read and write is next to universal: in 2004, 80% of adult men and 73% of adult women had basic literacy skills. Of great social importance is the rapid growth of female school enrolment and the increasing presence of women in the labour market. These deep changes constitute a primary driver of economic growth in developing countries.

- **Globalisation**- Over the last fifty years, world gross domestic product has increased by about five times, while trade has increased tenfold over the same period. This data suggests that the intensity of the commercial exchange between countries has developed faster than the overall economy. However, globalisation has gone beyond the exchange of physical commodities and it is progressively also modelling the lifestyles and consumption patterns of individuals and societies.

- **Social tension and opposition to change**- New international flows have diminished the role of traditional political institutions—sometimes with negative consequences for social stability. In many societies, stability (or slow evolution) has been substituted by unstoppable and irreversible transformations. As a result, individuals and communities perceive a high degree of insecurity—insecurity that touches every aspect of their lives. Growing masses of people feel threatened by the changes that affect their material (work, income, house), psychological (personal relationships), and cultural life (with the need to continuously update knowledge and professional skills).

- **The social improvement of the masses**—resulting from increasing literacy and income, universal means of communication and a new social role of women—has eroded the traditional role of the elites and have weakened the traditional regulatory role of the state.

- **Economic growth and evolution of political institutions**- The economic success of authoritarian regimes, mainly in Asia, suggests that (at least in the short term) economic growth is independent from the democratisation of political institutions. However, economic development favours the development of democratic institutions—but only if economic growth leads to substantial changes in cultural and social structures.

- **Breakdown of natural equilibria**- When demographic growth is multiplied by the growth of per capita income and consumption, one can have a measure of the global impact on environmental sustainability. Demographic and economic development is endangering our current forms of civilization and social co-living and our future ability to inhabit our planet. Alternative scenarios developed by international organisations suggest the possibility of a serious breakdown of natural equilibrium unless political, scientific, and economic tools are directed to a correction towards an acceptable equilibrium between humankind and with nature.

Considering how society has changed over the years could link to strategic planning. Analysing the organisational environment and the impact that the contemporary society has on an organisation will keep you one step ahead.