

# **PROMOTING INNOVATIVE PERFORMANCE OF A SERVICE ORGANIZATION THROUGH CUSTOMER KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

*Service organizations are trying to identify and promote the prerequisites of promoting their innovation and innovative performance. The goal of these attempts is effective encountering with challenges caused by rigorous competition and drastic changes. Due to the vital contribution of knowledge in a knowledge-based era, in the current study among numerous effecting factors, the role of customer knowledge management upon innovative performance have been investigated in a service organization. In order to achieve this, three fundamental components of customer knowledge management (knowledge about customer, knowledge from customer and knowledge for customer) have been assessed. In terms of objective, the current study is an applied research and its methodology is descriptive and correlational. The population of interest consists of a service organization's customers in Tehran among whom*

*384 people have been selected randomly as the statistical sample. Data collection tool is standard questionnaire whose reliability has been calculated using Cranach's Alpha method. Data analysis has been conducted by statistical path analysis testing through 8.5 version of Lisrel Software. Findings indicate that studied components of customer knowledge management have positive and significant effects on the innovative performance of the mentioned organization.*

*Keywords: Innovative Performance, Customer Knowledge Management, Knowledge from Customers, Knowledge for Customers, Knowledge about Customers*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In today knowledge-based economics, intangible assets of the organizations have become considerable value (Ramasuami and colleagues, 2009). Despite past decades that the potential and capacity of the countries made sense in the innovation of their industry departments and productions, today this potential and capability have transferred to the service department. In today world, the service department has allocated a major contribution of the economic activities of the societies to itself; consequently, today a major part of labor force is active in the field of services. About 5.47 percent of the labor force are active in the field of services in Iran (Danesh Jaafari, 2014). Despite this vast contribution, poor performance, high expenses, founding problem and dissatisfaction regarding services have made innovation in services become to one of the significant concerns of the mentioned organizations. Due to what was stated and pressures for improving the quality of the services and decreasing expenses of the organizations, the managers were forced to apply less bureaucratic structures and come up with strategies for making their organizations innovative. Since these strategies create particular requirements in various organizational components, identification and improvement of various human, structural and technological infrastructures that promote the tolerance for innovation at the organization would be inevitable; in the interim, knowledge is known to be a fundamental base for achieving strategic competences for better performance and competitive advantage. As a result, knowledge management has become essential for any organization in order to identification, assessment, organization, saving and applying knowledge (Nonaka and colleagues, 2002). On the other hand, today by promoting customers' position and their significance for the organization, customer knowledge management has become as significant as staff knowledge management (Ahmadi and Yahyazadeh, 2011). In customer knowledge management, there are sources of knowledge that they can utilize to develop their competitive

capabilities or create new capabilities (Rolins and Halinen, 2005); in other words, by applying knowledge management which is related with customers, customer knowledge management leads to achieving new marketing opportunities that is eventually followed by a higher level of performance and value-creating (Lin, Su and Chin, 2006). Customer knowledge management has caused emergence of novel procedures in the field of innovation and value creation; for instance, open innovation and customer-oriented innovations that referred to the significance of data, knowledge and competences out of the borders of the organization in innovation (Chesbrough, 2003) and also creation and production of a common value that creates competitive advantage in the organization by outer shareholders and actors' cooperation (Mating and colleagues, 2004), indicate the significance of outer knowledge management. In fact, quick changes of customers' demands and requirements, shortness of the longevity of the products/services; temporary competitive advantage and new forms of competition among the universal competitors have made innovation capability essential for the organizations (Johannessen and Olsen, 2010).

Customer knowledge management and applying customers' knowledge, have persuaded the organizations to rethink about management strategies and capture outer knowledge. In customer knowledge management, the customers' position is as significant as the staff's and their information, knowledge and competences are to be known as the basic sources of innovation and value-creation. In fact, by investing on knowledge of customer, knowledge from customer and knowledge for customer, the organizations cause data and ideas transfer between the inner and outer environment that would be effective on the innovation and performance of the organization; this is more vital in service organizations, as they are among customer-oriented industries and face extreme competition. Daily emergence of competitors in this industry, highlights necessity of applying customer knowledge and managing it for achieving new source of competitive advantage. Despite the significance of customer knowledge in the processes of the organizations and innovative performance of the service organizations, researches performed in this field are not rich enough and large gaps still exist in the this area. The current research targets the mentioned shortcoming and assesses the contribution of customer knowledge management in innovative performance of a service organization. It also assesses the impact of each dimensions of customer knowledge on promoting innovative performance of such organizations. In order to achieve this, after reviewing the background of the research, hypothesis of the research and conceptual model are presented. In the following, after methodology and data analysis, the results and related suggestions are reported.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Innovation in the Services**

Innovation is the most significant competitive advantage as it is able to assist new products, fulfilling customers' requirements, promoting the quality of the products and decreasing the expenses of the production. Innovation could be defined as compatibility with an idea or a behavior which is for the new organization (Osanlou and Khodami, 2014). With their innovations, companies would be able to respond to environmental alterations better and obtain new capabilities for achieving better performance. Innovative performance is known to be one of the fundamental factors of organizational performance which assists organizational learning, renovation, learning from failures and getting adapted with the environment (Gandhi and colleagues, 2011). Innovative performance includes a combination of organizational achievements which are resulted from improving activities and contains various aspects of innovation in the product, structure and process (Hagedoorn and Cloud, 2003). In the past, the concept of innovation, often was important in the products and commodities, but today it is included a wider dimension and innovation in the field of services. These days, service organizations endeavor to promote their innovation capability for guaranteeing survival in competitive markets. Inconspicuousness is the specific feature of services.

The mentioned feature makes numerous and effective interactions with the customers essential. Sometimes, innovation in services includes novel intangible ideas and sometimes, it is a combination of existing ideas with physical objects (Hertough and colleagues, 2010: 500)

In order to test innovative performance, two components of innovation have been utilized in the current research:

### ***Innovations in the Services***

Innovation in the services is one of the methods for obtaining advantage in highly competitive environments. Furthermore, in recent years, presenting services with interaction with the customers has found a key role. Innovation in the services could lead to introduction of new services or improving them (Blouch and Bouge, 2013: 137). It also includes utilizing new methods and tools that lead to improvement in presenting services and provide customer satisfaction. Presenting a service could include merely presenting a service or service presentation along with the product (Chen and colleagues, 2009: 39).

### ***Innovations in the Process***

Process innovation is performed in order to reduce the cost of services, or increase the quality of the service. The purpose of innovation in process, is improving productivity. This kind of

innovation causes the organization to gain advantages such as increasing the speed of service presentation and improving quality in presenting the services (Chen and colleagues, 2009: 39)

### **Customer Knowledge Management**

Both knowledge management and customer relationship management tend to find resources for supporting commercial processes of a field. Since combination of these two mentioned theories which is known as customer knowledge management and it is an appropriate strategy for getting knowledge of the customer and presenting him with adequate knowledge. Customer knowledge management means applying tools and techniques of knowledge management for supporting knowledge exchange between the organization and its customers and empowering the field for making appropriate commercial decision (Murillo and Annabi, 2002). Customer knowledge management has been defined as exploiting knowledge for customer, from customer and about customer in order to increase capabilities for customers by the organization (Rowley, 2002). In fact, customer knowledge management utilizes knowledge management as a supporting tool for customer knowledge in order to both provide the knowledge required by the customer and ease his access to this knowledge at the same time. On the other hand, customer knowledge management endeavors to improve exploiting this knowledge by saving and simplifying access to it (Shami Zanjani and Najafloo, 2011). Customer knowledge management enables the organization to recognize the market opportunities better and utilize them for its competitive advantage. Advantages and outcomes of utilizing customer knowledge are both beneficial for the customer and the organization at the same time. Some of the advantages of this kind of knowledge usage for the organization includes the following: (Feng, 2005): improving products, improving service presentation, customer satisfaction, sale promotion, improving maintaining and keeping the customer, familiarization of the organization with the customer knowledge.

Three types of knowledge that have a vital contribution between the field and the customers are the followings: knowledge "for", "from" and "about" the customer. At the first level, in order to support customers in the purchasing process, a knowledge is required which is being guided from the field to the customers (knowledge for customers). This type of knowledge impacts the customer's perception of the quality of the services (Rollins, 2005). "Knowledge from customer" could be exploited as creating innovation, producing ideas and constant improvement of services and productions as well. Getting knowledge from the customer and utilizing their participation in the innovation process could be performed using different methods. For instance, customers' knowledge regarding production, suppliers and market tendencies could be utilized for strategic improvement and innovation in products using appropriate

mechanism. Collecting and analyzing "knowledge about customer" is one of the oldest forms of the activities of knowledge management in the field of customer relationship management. In addition to demographic information and past bargains, "knowledge about customer" includes customers' current requirements, future demands, purchasing activities and affordability as well (Shami Zanjani and Najaflou, 1390).

### ***Knowledge about Customer***

This is a kind of knowledge that helps the organization recognize its customer and target them effectively. There are three types of knowledge about the customer: demography, psychology and behavioral (Bous, 2003). According to Shami Zanjani and colleagues (2008), knowledge about customer, is a kind of knowledge that the field obtains for better recognition of its targeted customers. They consider different types of "knowledge about customer" as follow:

- Knowledge and information about the current customer
- . Current customers' historical information and knowledge
- . Information and knowledge about the current customers' requirements
- Information and knowledge about potential customers
- . Potential customers' personal knowledge and information
- . Information and knowledge about the potential customers' interests and preferences

### ***Knowledge for Customer***

Knowledge for customer is a kind of knowledge for promoting customers' awareness and experiments regarding products and services of the company. Improvement of the electronic business has caused the transfer of tangible experiment to become a vital affair for the user. According to Shami Zanjani and the others (2008), knowledge for customer is a kind of knowledge that customers obtain to recognize us better. Data, information of knowledge customer could be obtained from various resources like other customers, competitors, consultation institutes or the company itself (Rowley, 2002). Knowledge for customer, is normally a one-sided relationship from the company to the customer which provides customers' required information about the organization for them to enable them gain a better recognition regarding the products and the organization (Day G.S, 2000).

According to Shami Zanjani and others (2008), different types of "knowledge for customer" include:

- information and knowledge about the products and services of the company: knowledge and information needs of current customers and potential customers

- general knowledge and information of the company: information that represent the company, knowledge products of the company
- environmental information and knowledge of the field: information and knowledge regarding the market and the competitors' products and services (Rowley, 2002)

### ***Knowledge from Customer***

Knowledge from customer includes ideas, viewpoints and information that the organization receives from its customers. These viewpoints could be about the current products and services, customers' processes, future requirements and ideas for innovation at the company. Ideas that are presented for success of the product innovation are often received from the final user and customer, not inside of the organization. In order to achieve this, the organization must actively try to gain it. It must help the customers to be creative regarding the products and personalize them according to their personal requirements and preferences (Bose, Sugumaran, 2003). According to Shami Zanjani and others (2008), knowledge from customer is a kind of knowledge that the field gains in relation with product promotion and its services.

Knowledge from customer includes information related to the company and competitors. Information related to the company is the result of customer's viewpoint and information related to the competitors is a result of customer's view point regarding the competitors (Rowley, 2002).

### **Customer Knowledge Management and Innovation**

Innovation means "constant endeavor for creating knowledge and new ideas for achieving alteration and improvement" (Plessis, 2007). Environmental knowledge has a significant role in the process of innovation. Organizations that are privileged with attracting this type of knowledge, could be aware of the requirements of the outer environment and bring new ideas to the organization (Kohen and Levintal, 1990). One of the most significant aspects of the outer knowledge for service organization is customer knowledge (Gebert and colleagues, 2002). This kind of knowledge could be a significant resource for innovation. Customers are privileged with worthy knowledge regarding the field, products, services, markets and competitors. This kind of knowledge could impact promoting innovation indirectly and taking advantage of promoting performance through innovation; consequently, most of the organizations try to bring in customers' knowledge and ideas through customer knowledge management (Hollebeek, 2013). Accurate customer knowledge management might lead to reinforcing R & D activities, improving innovation, finding new opportunities of the market and guaranteeing long-term relationship with the customers (Royley and colleagues, 2005). Innovations resulted from customers are much more creative and beneficial than those of the professionals (Mag Noson, 2003). Furthermore,

considering customer's ideas and requirements leads to creation of the ideas in a shorter time and presentation of the products with a higher quality and innovative services (Hoyer and colleagues, 2010)

## EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The numbers of researches that have been performed regarding the impact of customer knowledge on innovation and innovative performance of the organization have been presented in table 1.

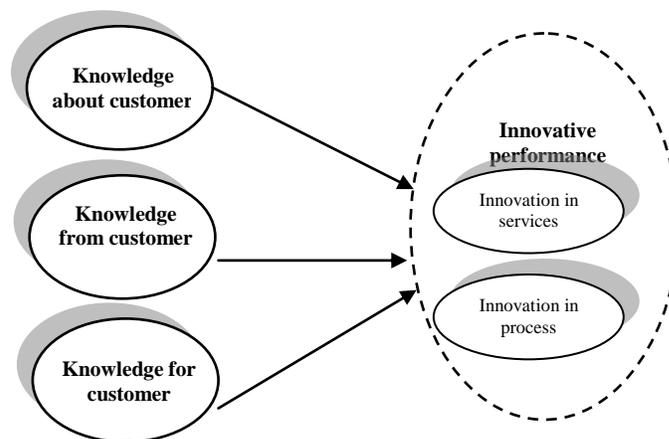
Table 1: Empirical background of the research (quoted from Shami Zanjani et al, 2008)

Researcher (year)	Title of the research	Results of the research
Yang(2010)	Assessment of strategies of knowledge management on the performance of the company	Customer knowledge impacts on the performance of the company through innovation of the process
Sufi Anti and colleagues(2010)	Stages of creating customer knowledge in developing new product	Knowledge management like marketing and CRM is required for developing new products and innovation
Yang and Kang(2008)	Assessing the relation between innovation assets and customer's asset with the performance of the company	There is a significant and positive relation between innovation and customer assets
Yung and colleagues(2008)	Customer knowledge and operational performance at clothing factories	Assessing the impact of various aspects of customer knowledge (quality of the product, customer services, effective seller, effective communications,social acceptance) is effective on operational performance
Sue and colleagues(2006)	the link between developing innovative products with customer knowledge	Suggesting Eckm model and its impact on innovative products
Leo and colleagues(2004)	Impact of relationship with customer and social capitals on the performance of the company	Relationship with the customer has a stronger impact on the performance of the company in comparison with other factors

## Conceptual Model

Based on the stated literature, in the current research the components of customer knowledge management have been considered as independent variables and innovative performance as dependent one. Triple components of customer knowledge management have been taken from Rolins and Holinen's (2005) model that contains three types of knowledge: knowledge from customer, knowledge for customer and knowledge about customer. Innovative performance of the organization includes two components including innovation in services and innovation in creating services (Yang, 2010). The impact of customer knowledge management on innovative performance of service organization has considered based on Sufi Anti (2010) and Yang's (2010) findings. Based on what was stated the conceptual model of the research has been illustrated as figure 1.

Figure 1: The Conceptual Model of the Research



Considering what was stated in theoretical background and the conceptual model, codified hypothesis of the current research are the followings:

1. Knowledge about customer has a positive impact on promoting innovative performance of the service organization.
2. Knowledge from customer has a positive impact on promoting innovative performance of the service organization.
3. Knowledge for customer has a positive impact on promoting innovative performance of the service organization.

## METHODOLOGY

### The Research Typology

Since the findings of this research are used to solve the problems of the organization, this research can be an applied one. Based on the type of data collection technique used, this research is descriptive correlational as the required data of the existing situation was collected through a questionnaire. Also in terms of time is cross-sectional and about type of data is a quantitative research.

### The Population of Interest

The population of interest consists of a service organization's customers in Tehran among whom 384 people have been selected randomly as the statistical sample. The size of sample has been based on the sampling formula of indefinite population.

### Data Collection Tools

The data collection tool for the survey has been a questionnaire containing 17 items which were arranged based on Likert scale. Five items have measured innovative performance, and each of the three components of customer knowledge management has been measured by four items. To estimate the questionnaire reliability, the initial ample consisting of 30 items was pretested. The reliability coefficient was estimated through Cronbach alpha test using SPSS software. The reliability estimation of the questionnaire is presented in Table 2. Accordingly, Cronbach's Alpha of all of the questions related to all of the variables is more than critical limit of 0.7; consequently, it could be stated that measuring tool has been reliable.

Table 2: The Reliability Coefficient of the Questionnaire

	Knowledge from customer	Knowledge for customer	Knowledge about customer	Innovative performance
<b>Reliability Coefficient</b>	76%	74%	79%	82%

### Data Analysis Approach

In order to analyze the collected data from samples and examine the relation among the concepts being studied in following research and their dimensions of confirmatory factor analysis and assess the assumptions of the research, structural equations modeling have been applied through 8.5 version of Lizrel. Structural equations modeling have been utilized in order to analyze the data. In the mentioned model, we want to identify whether the relations among

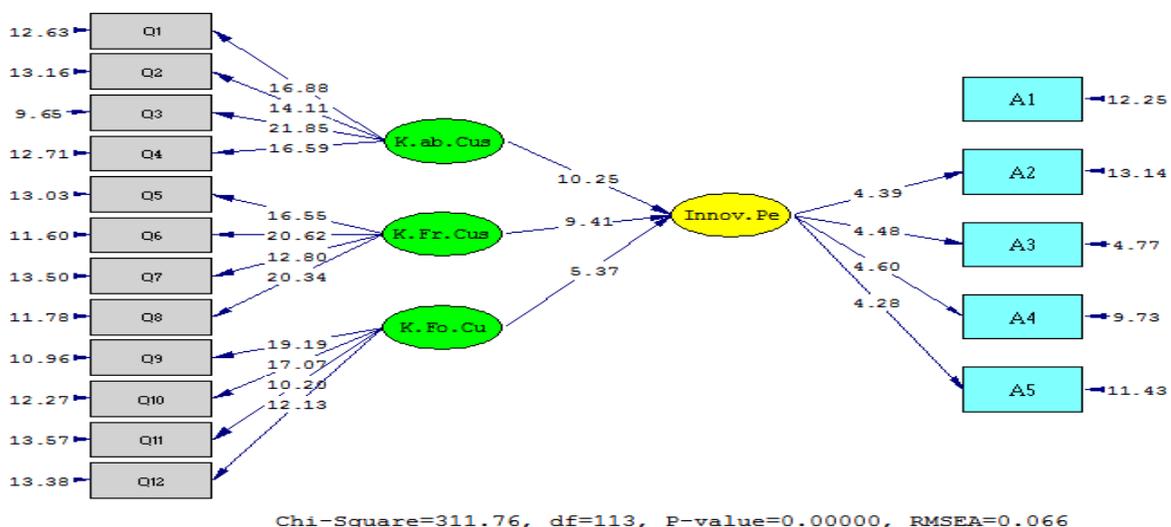
the hidden adjectives that have been extracted based on the theory would be confirmed considering the aggregated data of the sample or not (Kalantari, 2009). There are 17 apparent and 4 latent variables in this model. In order to assess significance of the predicted relations in the assumptions significant model and in order to assess the amount of effect the standard model has been applied.

## RESULTS

Specific indexes are used for assessing accuracy of the developed model including: the ratio of chi-squared to the degree of freedom that should be lower than permissible amount of 3, the amount of the average of root-mean square of the adiabatic approximation whose permissible limit should be lower than 0.08 and the amount of P-value that should be lower than 0.05 and the modified fit index should be greater than 0.9. In order to assess significance of customer knowledge management on innovative performance, significance model has been utilized and for assessing the amount of these effects the standard model has been used. Regarding significance of the acquired numbers of the model, it could be stated that since the hypothesis test is being performed in the reliability level of 0.95, numbers would be significant that would not be between -1.96 and 1./96. In other words, in case a number would be between -1.96 and 1.96, that number would not be significant.

Based on the indexes mentioned in table 3, we are able to judge fitness model of the of the dimensions of customer knowledge management on innovative performance. The results of the assessment of the significance of the predicted relations are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Model of the Effect of Customer Knowledge Management on Innovative Performance in Significance Mode



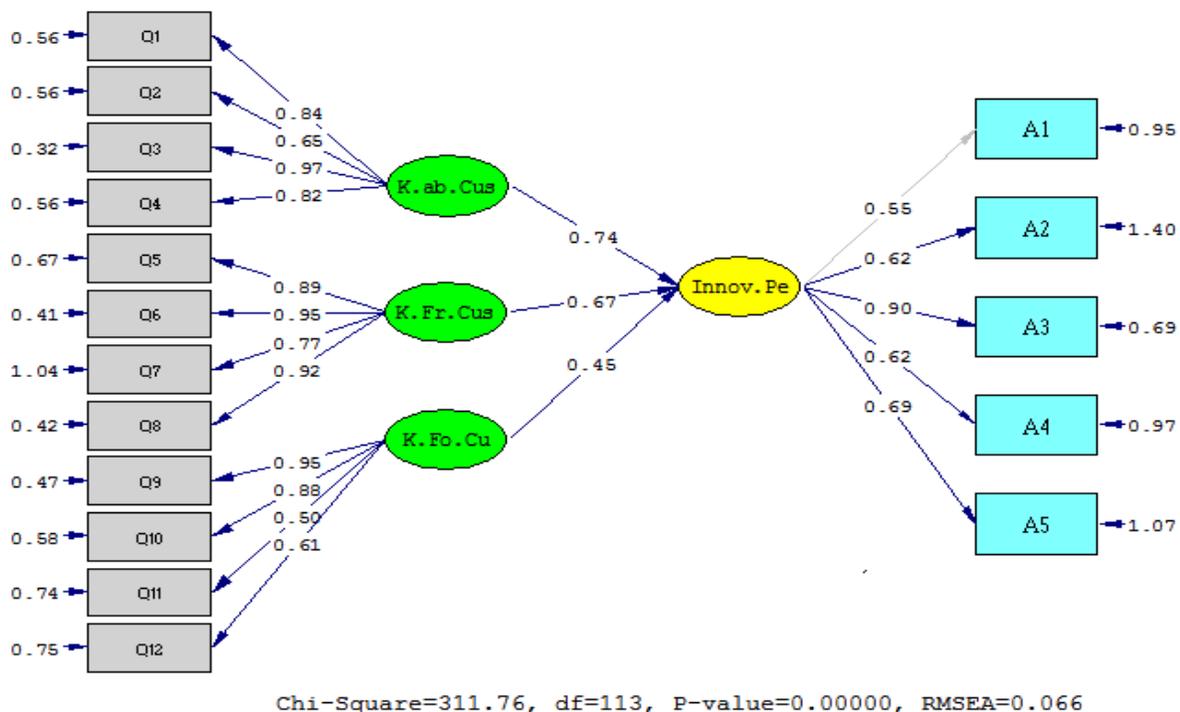
Using the standard model the amount of the impact of the relations in this model whose significance has been confirmed could be assessed as well.

Table 3: Indexes of the Fitness Model of the Effect of Customer Knowledge Management on Innovative Performance

Indexes	Permissible limit	Result	Assessment
Ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom	$\chi^2/df < 3$	2.61	Appropriate fitness
Root-mean square of adiabatic approximation (RMSEA)	RMSEA > 0.08	0.066	Approximately Appropriate fitness

The indexes of fitness of the mode, indicates appropriateness of the measuring model of the relevant variables; as the ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom equals 2.61 and less than allowable amount of 3, and the amount of Root-mean Square error of approximation which is 0.071 equals permissible limit which is less than 0.08 and higher than 0.05. Based on this model, the impact of predicted relations is significant in all hypothesis as well; as their amount for hypothesis first to fifth equals 9.57, 6.14, 8.97, 6.02 and 8.11 respectively and all of them are higher than 1.96.

Figure 3: The Model of the Effect of Customer Knowledge Management on Innovative Performance in Standard Mode



In the standard state, the model indicates that the positive impact of three components of customer knowledge management on innovative performance is confirmable. Consequently, based on the results acquired from the significance and standard models, the results of the assessment of the hypothesis of the research could be summarized in table 4.

Table 4: The Results of the Assessment of the Hypothesis

Hypothesis	Rout: positive and significant effect of ...	Standard coefficient	Significance numbers	Result
1	Knowledge about customer on innovative performance.	0.74	10.25	Confirmed
2	Knowledge from customer on innovative performance.	0.67	9.41	confirmed
3	Knowledge for customer on innovative performance.	0.45	5.37	confirmed

General pattern of the relations among the variables in structural equation model were compatible with the stated hypothesis, all of the 3 investigated relations have been significant. Based on the acquired results all of the components of customer knowledge management have significant effects on innovative performance of the studied organization. Furthermore, the most determinant component of customer knowledge management in this regard has been knowledge about customer (0.74) and the least effect has been related to knowledge for customer (0.45).

## DISCUSSIONS

General patterns of the relation among the variables at structural equation model were compatible with the stated hypothesis, every three assessed relations have been significant. Based on the findings components of customer knowledge management have a significant effect upon the innovative performance of the service organizations. These findings are compatible with the results of the researches performed in the past; for instance, Nikraftar and colleagues (2014) found out that in minor and average industries organizational innovation has a direct relation with marketing innovation. Esmaeelpour and colleagues (2016) found out that knowledge from customer has a significant positive effect upon the speed and quality of innovation and financial and operational performance of the banks as well. This impact has been positive but different regarding knowledge about customer and knowledge for customer. Furthermore, Yang (2010) found out that knowledge management affects organizational performance through process innovation.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In the highly competitive world ahead of the organization, identification and improvement of the prerequisites for promoting innovation has a significant role in their performance promotion, profitability and survival. The current research has assessed innovative performance promotion of service organizations. The findings of the research have confirmed the positive and significant effect of all three types of customer knowledge on innovative performance of this organization. Based on this, it could be concluded that service organizations that desire constant promotion of their own performance must consider effective customer knowledge management as a vital responsibility. Using the knowledge of its customers and management of innovation processes and organizational performance could be a way to overcome the complex and changing conditions to lead to the distinction, would meet the needs of customers and the market, too.

The findings of the current research have been compatible with those of previous ones that have assessed the role of customer knowledge management in innovation (Gebert and colleagues, 2002 and Rolins and colleagues, 2005) and also with those who have examined the effect of sharing knowledge from customer and knowledge about and for customer on constant innovations. Each types of the mentioned knowledge have a different impact upon innovative performance. Knowledge from customer helps the company illustrate a better image for its position and achieve new idea for innovation by providing information that the customers have about other products, markets and competitors (Smith and Mc Keen, 2005). Knowledge about customer by considering him as a member of organization creates engagement in customer which is effective in persuading him for sharing ideas and knowledge (Nambisan, 2009). Knowledge for customer with improve the level of customer knowledge, lead to the creation of new ideas in customers' minds and by transferring these ideas into the organization, new marketing opportunities could be achieved (Darroch and Mc Nagton, 2003). By utilization of customer knowledge, service organizations could get aware of the ideas out of the organization in a shorter time and as a result, proceed to innovation sooner than the competitors. Furthermore, by providing new ideas, knowledge from customer could promote the quality of services at these organizations. Also, applying knowledge from customer and performing ideas resulted from it, ensures the customers that their opinions are important for the organization and this surely provides the required ground for achieving better operational results. In addition to what was stated, since knowledge from customer is a new source of knowledge, it could make their innovative performance better by creating competitive advantages for these kinds of organizations. Eventually, since it is worthy and inimitable, knowledge from customer brings long-term advantages for the organizations and makes services to be presented in a shorter

time and with a higher quality. To sum up, attracting customers' knowledge and managing it accurately, could have a significant role in innovative performance of service organizations. Innovations that are performed by customers' ideas and knowledge could be a way for overcoming today complicated and altering circumstances ahead of service organizations.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

There might be unwanted factors in any research that make limitations to the research; hence, some of the unwanted variables are not under researcher's control. These factors must be determined and the researcher must show his knowledge about the influence of these factors on the research results. In the present study, there were some limitations such as:

- 1) To study the variables the survey (questionnaire tools) has been used; while it was better to use observation and/or interview for some factors. The questionnaire is a tool by which the understandings and attitude of any person is investigated; whereas, the reality might be different with respondent's answers.
- 2) There are two issues must be considered regarding the nature and generalization of the research: firstly, there might be some practical behaviors like other survey researches that are mostly dependent on environmental conditions. Furthermore, intervening variables might affect the supposed relations among variables that are considered in this study.
- 3) Some other important limitations to this research include: reluctance of some of the respondents to answer the questionnaires, not enough carefulness of some of the respondents in answering the questions, the possibility of bias in answering the questions by some of the respondents.

## WAY FORWARD

The results of this research indicate considerable effects of customer knowledge management on innovative performance of the studied service organization. However, better recognition of these effects depends on perceiving the role of various intervening and mediating factors. It is suggested to assess the role of the mentioned factors in future studies. In addition, re-conducting the current research once more at other organizations would assist in more complete understanding in this regard.

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