

Chapter 1

A Communities of Practice Approach to Management Knowledge Dissemination

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ABSTRACT

A communities of practice perspective is used to unravel the actions and activities that facilitate the dissemination of management knowledge between organizations across space and time. In so doing, the local embedded nature of knowledge is recognized, as is the manner in which interactions between the pervasive and the specific provide a creative dynamic that facilitates the widespread dissemination and a multiple creation of knowledge. Knowledge interactions are explored in terms of boundary processes involving interactions between management gurus, management consultants, business schools/management academics, managers and business media. Moreover, by making a clear distinction between management knowledge and management ideas and techniques, important differences between the groups engaged in the dissemination of management knowledge are revealed.

INTRODUCTION

The community of practice, which has been identified as a mechanism through which knowledge is held, transferred and created within and between organizations (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, et al. 2002), is employed as an approach with which to

analyze the actions and interactions that facilitate the dissemination of management knowledge. A number of studies have explored the dissemination and circulation of management knowledge (Abrahamson 1996; Subbary and Green, 2002; Sahlin Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Thrift, 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to add to this literature through an analysis of the dissemination of management knowledge from a communities of practice perspective. This analysis seeks to unravel

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the actions and activities that facilitate the transfer of management knowledge between organizations across space and time. In so doing, the local embedded nature of knowledge is recognized, as is the manner in which interactions between the pervasive and the specific provide a creative dynamic that facilitates the widespread dissemination and a multiple creation of knowledge. In the current global competitive environment knowledge is the key source of competitive advantage (Drucker, 1993). By shedding light on the mechanisms that facilitate the transfer of management knowledge this chapter will contribute to the promotion of successful knowledge intensive business activity. The chapter will be of interest to managers, academics and policymakers seeking to promote knowledge creation and dissemination.

The chapter begins with an overview of the management knowledge field before the communities of practice framework is explored. The concept of boundary processes is then considered as a mechanism that facilitates the dissemination of knowledge between communities and constellations of practice. The communities of practice framework is then applied to the management knowledge field with consideration given to the interactions between groups within the field. A discussion of the analysis is followed by suggestions for further research and concluding comments.

THE MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE FIELD

The management knowledge field is the context within which management knowledge is produced and distributed. It is useful to begin by exploring the notion of knowledge in general terms before elaborating on the management knowledge field. Knowledge involves an awareness or understanding gained through experience, familiarity or learning; it entails cognitive structures that can assimilate information and put it into a wider context, allowing actions to be undertaken from

it (Howells & Roberts, 2000). In discussions of knowledge a distinction is often made between tacit and codified or implicit and explicit knowledge. Knowledge is codified if it is recorded or transmitted in the form of symbols (e.g. writing or drawings) or embodied in a tangible form (e.g. machinery or tools). Through the process of codification, knowledge is reduced to information that can be transformed into knowledge by those individuals who have access to the appropriate code or framework of analysis. Tacit knowledge is non-codified knowledge that is acquired via the informal take-up of learning behaviour and procedures (Howells, 1996); it is often referred to as know-how.

In their study of organizational knowledge, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) identify two dimensions of tacit knowledge: the technical dimension encompassing skills or crafts; and, the cognitive dimension consisting of schemata, mental models, and beliefs that shape the way individuals perceive the world around them. Elaborating on their idea of knowledge conversion in the context of the organization, they stress the mutual complementary nature of tacit and explicit knowledge, arguing that they ‘interact with and interchange into each other in the creative activities of human beings.’ Their dynamic model of knowledge creation ‘is anchored to a critical assumption that human knowledge is created and expanded through social interaction between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge’ (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 61).

For the purposes of analyzing the management knowledge field this chapter builds on these insights into the nature of knowledge by proposing a clear distinction between management knowledge and management ideas and techniques. Management knowledge is used here to refer to knowledge that is tacit in the sense that it is embedded into the everyday practice of management. In contrast, management ideas relate to knowledge that is disembedded from practice and embodied in a mental representation or the characterization of knowledge in general terms,

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