

Chapter XIV

The Role of Knowledge Mediators in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the role of online knowledge mediator, an entity that occupies an intermediate position in a knowledge transfer/exchange between a source and a receiver, and whose task is to assist and facilitate the knowledge transfer process, when performed through the use of Internet-based technologies to a significant degree. In the present rapidly evolving world of Internet, many types of virtual knowledge mediators continue to come out with different features and functions. Despite their growing diffusion, little effort has been devoted to examine their practices thoroughly. In light of this, the chapter aims to develop an analytical framework that could be of use to a deeper and more systematic investigation of these new economic agents. It is a two-dimensional framework, since it is based on two complementary, conceptual views of the knowledge transfer process, that is, the cognitive and the economic one.

INTRODUCTION

Although knowledge has, for a long time, been recognised as a key resource for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage, only in recent years the need to efficiently and effectively manage it has emerged clearly, especially as a consequence of the increased possibilities offered by the

Internet-related information and communication technologies (ICTs). Actually, such technologies have dramatically reduced costs and increased speed, spatial reach, and amount of information and knowledge flows (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2006; Kim & Trimi, 2007).

In that context, the discipline of Knowledge Management (KM) has developed, and has at-

tracted the increasing interest of both scholars and practitioners. According to Coakes et al. (Coakes, Bradburn, & Sugden, 2004), KM entails any process or practice of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing, and using knowledge, wherever it resides, to enhance learning and performance in organisation. Similarly, Holsapple and Joshi (2006) define KM as an entity's (e.g., an individual, group, organisation, etc.) deliberate and organised efforts to expand, cultivate, and apply available knowledge in ways to add value to the entity, in sense of positive results in accomplishing its goals or fulfilling its purpose. To sum up, KM involves several processes¹ whose ultimate aim is to make the relevant knowledge available where it can be usefully applied to enhance the performance of the organisation, thus, generating economic value.

Even if all the different KM activities give their specific contribution to the value generation, the KM literature has always devoted particular attention on the knowledge transfer process (Riege, 2007). The reason is the fact the actual challenge organizations have to deal with is not incrementing the existing knowledge pool, but locating and capturing the needed piece of knowledge and transferring it where it is of use. Knowledge transfer is important also because it allows avoiding the need to reinvent an already successfully applied solution. To this point, it can be recalled the famous saying of an HP top executive, "if we only knew what we already know" (Sieloff, 1999), that exactly indicates where the heart of the matter resides. It must be specified that the literature makes a distinction between the terms knowledge transfer, sharing, and exchange (Boyd, Ragsdell, & Oppenheim, 2007; King, 2006a, 2006b; Lindsey, 2006). In particular, while knowledge transfer is one directional, since the knowledge flows from the sender to the recipient(s), knowledge sharing is a multidirectional process that usually occurs between several actors, who can be senders and receivers at the same time. Conversely, knowledge

exchange is similar to knowledge transfer, but it takes place between two parties and is reciprocal in that the recipient will reward the sender by transferring to him/her a different piece of knowledge (or by paying him/her for the knowledge received). Given the theme of the chapter, in the following pages, the three terms will be used interchangeably, as often done in the literature.

At the beginning, during the so-called first generation KM that mainly considered knowledge as an object that can be possessed and exchanged (Huysman & Wulf, 2006), ICTs were deemed to be able to overcome most of the difficulties and obstacles related to the knowledge transfer process. In reality, those technologies, especially the Internet-based, may have a double effect, may be friends or foes, as rightly said by Hendriks and Vriens (1999). On the one side, in fact, they make possible to have access to a vast amount of information, to communicate without space and time constraints, to store, retrieve, and manipulate a large quantity of data and documents rapidly and effectively. On the other side, the same technologies are making it even easier to get lost in a sea of chaotic, and even dangerous, information, as well depicted by the term "information overload," which has been recently coined to denote such a situation. Furthermore, they may induce the belief that the success of the knowledge transfer process is only a matter of having an adequate technological infrastructure, an idea that many experiences have revealed to be completely wrong (Desouza, 2003; Walsham, 2001).

On the contrary, according to the recently emerged second generation KM that considers knowledge as constructed through joint experience in social networks and groups (Newell et al., 2006), technology is a still necessary (Holsapple, 2005) but not sufficient tool, while it is essential to implement appropriate organisational structures (e.g., communities of practice, knowledge networks, etc.), processes, and mechanisms able to facilitate the sharing of experience, ideas, and suggestions directly among individuals.

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