

Chapter XIII

Leading Firms as Knowledge Gatekeepers in a Networked Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the role of the knowledge gatekeeper as a mechanism by which knowledge is created and transferred in a networked environment. Knowledge creation and transfer are essential for building a knowledge-based economy. The chapter considers obstacles that inhibit this process and argues that leading firms create a shared sociocultural context that enables the condensation of tacit meanings and codification of knowledge. Leading firms act as gatekeepers of knowledge through the creation of shared virtual platforms. There will be a leading firm that connects several networks of clients and suppliers who may not interact directly with one another, but are, indeed, connected indirectly through the leading firm that acts as a gatekeeper. The chapter argues that a large firm connecting several clients and suppliers at the multinational level represents a gatekeeper, but even individuals and focal firms in industrial districts can be gatekeepers. The author hopes that, through this discussion, academics, researchers, and doctoral students will have a comprehensive theoretical and practical basis on which to study the role of leading firms in building innovations and virtual teams of knowledge sharing in a highly networked and competitive environment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the role of leading firms in knowledge sharing practices in networked environments. In a global economy, distant re-

lationships can be a source of novel ideas and expert insights useful for innovation processes. Firms can develop global channels and create platforms not only to exchange products or services, but also in order to benefit from outside

knowledge inputs and desire for growth. Recent indications also are that, in a global knowledge economy, organisational success can no longer be measured based on its internal interactions alone. Rather, corporate success can be derived from its capacity and its ability to identify and access external knowledge sources located far away, and to convert this knowledge into an explicit format that can be transferred and reused.

On the one hand, this is an indication that knowledge is an external factor that can have an effect on firms' innovative processes, and that the extent of the effect is more or less dependent on the extent of relationships with other firms. On the other hand, the author acknowledges that many of the developed countries have successfully integrated information and computer technology to support business processes, but research into knowledge creation and knowledge transfer processes remains subdivided along several lines; and this subject still lacks focus and consistency. The value of the availability of the Internet to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations can be related to cultural understanding as well as scientific development. However, codified knowledge can be shared on the net, whilst much of the tacit knowledge cannot. In this chapter, the author introduces perspectives of knowledge-sharing practice under the support of leading firms, and discusses how this is supported by social interactions as well as technological tools such as the Internet. Using knowledge gatekeeper theories, we are able to show that the practices of both sharing knowledge and, more specifically, sharing knowledge through networking and virtual places offered by leading and focal firms, may be directly linked to existing social relationships that characterise communities' members. Social relationships are sophisticated and they may include several networks that, in a broad sense, act as knowledge gatekeepers. In this process, identity and learning culture of recipients play an important role in building trust and long-term

relationships that are perceived to be essential to distance networking and knowledge sharing. The indications are that the value of knowledge building can be maximised where social ties seem to exist; and above all, the identity of the source plays a greater part. This chapter uses theories that may be borrowed from different subject domains to enrich the debate. This is because, on the one hand, there continues to be what can be seen as technology-led knowledge management research that appears to sideline social tools such as communities of practice, social networks, gatekeepers, and alike. On the other hand, we continue to observe research into knowledge management that is inclined more to the social tools named, but does not bring in a technology perspective. In particular, in such research, the Internet-supported knowledge sharing is not talked about. These are two interrelated areas, and they complement each other. Even in distant knowledge sharing, relationships are built and sustained over time. In this chapter, the author will not present further new empirical research; rather, he aims to provide food for thought, and a new way of thinking that would seek to bring together knowledge-creation and knowledge-transfer (KT) research to an intersection with technology-supported knowledge-sharing practices.

THE CONTEXT IN KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY RESEARCH

.... Ultimate limits to growth may lie not so much in our abilities to generate new ideas, as in our abilities to process to fruition an ever-increasing abundance of potentially fruitful ideas. (Weitzman, 1998, p. 331)

This statement underlines the need to have this debate on how and why building the knowledge society and enabling the extraction of value from knowledge exchange constitutes an integral part

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