

# Look into the Different Knowledge Sources in a Conference

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## INTRODUCTION

Most, if not all researchers attend conferences. Given the high conference costs and the need to travel great distances, it is likely that one of the key motivations is the opportunity to meet and interact with other scholars.

The rapidly growing environment of networked computers has made it possible to codify, store and share certain kinds of knowledge more easily and cheaply than ever before. Although conference committees continue to invest in knowledge practices, there has been no systematic assessment of knowledge sourcing methods. The present review provides a novel perspective on conference knowledge management. This perspective can help committee organizers to design IT to better support conference goals for sourcing knowledge and extending face- to- face interactions.

## BACKGROUND

### Conference Goals

Academic conferences provide an important channel for exchanging information among researchers (Reychav & Te'eni, 2008). Reychav & Te'eni showed that academic conferences lay the groundwork for social relationships between people from different cultures through symbolic forms and techniques including formal settings such as lectures and discussions, and informal settings such as social events.

## Knowledge Sourcing

Knowledge is defined here as the information, skills and expertise exchanged among conference attendees. One main obstacle to the exchange of knowledge is the fact that knowledge is property. Ownership is hence very important to attendees. Dalkir (2005) showed that individuals tend to be rewarded for what they know, not for what they share; so attendees in a conference must feel confident that they will receive an incentive for promoting their ideas or extending their collaboration in return for KS. Nevertheless, knowledge-sourcing is one of the most fundamental ways researchers cope with their environment, especially in a conference where researchers hope to find people with whom they can learn or exchange knowledge in their fields of interest.

## Knowledge Sourcing and Learning

Accessing and sourcing knowledge can increase learning in organizations (Gribbins et al., 2007). These learning behaviors fall into two categories: individuals can either learn from their own experiences, or from the experiences of others (Levitt and March, 1988). Knowledge sourcing belongs to the latter category, and is distinct from direct behaviors that involve learning directly from the work environment, such as observation, experimentation (Lapre and Van Wassenhove, 2001), systematic problem solving (Garvin, 1993), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and learning by doing (Arrow, 1962). Knowledge sourcing is an indirect form of learning behavior where individuals gain access to

others' understanding of the work environment through interactions. Previous organizational research on the impact of IT has focused on learning that takes place either in a face-to-face environment or online (Alavi et al., 2002). Online learning commonly includes the use of the Internet (Kim and Bonk, 2006). Understanding knowledge sourcing is critical for designing and developing KM technologies, which play a unique role in transferring knowledge in organizations.

Researchers have argued that qualitative examination is needed to better understand what global team members perceive as challenging and rewarding (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). This can be done by using the limited time frame of conferences, and can help develop strategies to make collaboration in a learning environment more satisfying.

## Knowledge Sourcing Methods

The KM literature deals with different ways that an individual can access others' expertise, experience, insights, and opinions to source knowledge (Davenport and De Long, 1998; Earl, 2001). KM research suggests that the implementation of new knowledge sourcing methods can reduce search and transfer costs (Gray and Meister, 2004). Organizations often support a wide variety of mechanisms for accessing others' knowledge, which range from ones recently proposed in the KM literature (e.g., knowledge repositories, virtual communities of practices such as meetings, etc.). Paralleling what has taken place in the business field, the foundation of industrialized economies has shifted from natural resources to intellectual assets, and executives have been compelled to examine the knowledge underlying their business and how this knowledge is sourced and used. The KM literature has attempted to address the theoretical need, to better articulate what kind of knowledge individuals source, how often different sourcing methods are implemented, and which technology tools are used.

Determining participants' preferred forms of knowledge sourcing is crucial for developing the KM infrastructure of a conference. Much of the research on knowledge transfer has investigated individuals' methods of transferring knowledge (social networks, knowledge repositories, e-mail, etc.). What has not yet been theorized or investigated are the various types of

knowledge sourcing methods used for sourcing content knowledge and knowledge of people. In particular, information seeking research (Johnson, 1996; Sussman and Siegal, 2003) does not distinguish between content knowledge and knowledge about people that participants are exposed to in a conference.

To explore KM in a conference setting, we grouped knowledge sourcing methods according to Harasim's (1989) typology of communication-based learning as one-to-many, one-to one, and many-to-many. These three categories were also used by Culnan and Markus (1987) to group electronic media. Because knowledge sourcing is a communication behavior, we used these categories to identify three distinct forms of knowledge sourcing behaviors for content knowledge and knowledge about people in a conference.

## MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

### Knowledge Sourcing Types in a Conference

In industry, knowledge can be codified and stored in databases and thus be available to all, or it can be closely tied to the person who developed it and be shared through contacts. Codification and personalization also define the types of knowledge that can be sourced and exchanged in conferences among attendees who have different backgrounds and who may use different types of technologies to source knowledge in the conference and later for future research. We thus used the notions of codification and personalization, but adjusted them to reflect the technological tools used to support both types of strategy in conferences. We term the codified knowledge 'content knowledge' and personalized knowledge as 'knowledge on people'. Both types of knowledge involve three channels of communication through which attendees can source specific knowledge. Reychav & Te'eni (2009) differentiated between KS in formal settings such as lectures and workshops, and informal settings such as coffee breaks and social events. In both settings content knowledge was studied in terms of several categories of knowledge, including presenters, subject, research, methodologies, results, conclusions, academic implications and practical implications.

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