Chapter 19
Within- and Between- CoP Knowledge Sharing in Knowledge-Intensive Firms

Thomas Garavan
University of Limerick, Ireland

Ronan Carbery
University of Limerick, Ireland

Fergal O'Brien
University of Limerick, Ireland

Karen Whelan
University of Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Knowledge is an important source of competitive advantage in knowledge-intensive firms. However, these firms experience problems in sharing tacit knowledge. Communities of practice (CoPs) are viewed as effective mechanisms to enable knowledge sharing through an emphasis on learning rather than structural imperatives. This chapter investigates knowledge sharing within- and between- CoPs in knowledge-intensive firms. Knowledge sharing in CoPs is influenced by a multiplicity of factors which we categorised as cognitive, relational and structural. Data collected from 40 members of eight CoPs support the view that knowledge sharing occurs more effectively within CoPs rather than between them. Such knowledge sharing is context driven and strongly dependent on shared mindsets, relationships and networks. We explore the implications for both researching CoPs and the facilitation of CoPs in knowledge-intensive firms.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge assets are critical resources that provide organisations with competitive advantage (Grover & Davenport, 2001; Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001) however many knowledge management initiatives do not deliver on expectations (Doswell & Reid, 2000; Beaumont & Hunter, 2002). Organisations manage explicit knowledge well but frequently struggle when seeking to capture tacit knowledge embedded in experienced and skilled people. This high value-added knowledge is particularly difficult to share using an information technology approach (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Gourlay, 2001). An alternative approach, the people approach, advocates that individuals in organisations have knowledge that must move to the level of groups and the organisation as a whole if it is to be of value for competitive purposes. A central focus of the people approach concerns knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is conceptualised as a natural activity in organisations, something that occurs automatically (Chakravarthy, Zaheer & Zaheer, 1999). It is also a multifaceted and complex process (Lessard & Zaheer, 1996; Ipe, 2003). Knowledge sharing occurs through interactions involving at a minimum two individuals. Jackson, Hitt and DeNisi (2003) argued that it is a critical intermediate process to ensure alignment of the acquisition and application of knowledge processes. Knowledge sharing is viewed as an important condition for future knowledge creation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

The role of knowledge sharing in the context of knowledge-based competition and innovation is well established (Hargadon & Sutton, 2000). Researchers and practitioners have focused on communities of practice (CoPs) as an appropriate strategy for the sharing of tacit knowledge (Iverson & McPhee, 2002; Koh & Kim, 2004). CoPs play a major role in knowledge sharing simply because knowledge cannot be separated from its context (Pan & Leidner, 2003; Ipe, 2003). CoPs have been described as "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). They are self-organising entities that have a collective purpose and are held together by social relationships. They are considered different from teams and business units because they are self-organising systems whose lifespan is determined by CoP members, Wenger (1998) argued that CoPs are not constrained by time and space and as a result can span organisational boundaries. The advocates of CoPs argue that they strengthen ties between people in the same professional groups and extend the network to larger groups (Lesser & Storck, 2001; Yoo, Suh & Lee, 2002). CoPs possess been identified as important loci for the creation and sharing of knowledge in organisations. Lesser and Storck (2001) have argued that CoPs have the capacity to retain dynamic and evolving knowledge within real-time processes and they bring context to existing stores of knowledge.

Knowledge sharing is particularly important in knowledge-intensive firms. These firms differ from traditional firms with regard to key knowledge sources, the role of codified and tacit knowledge and the types of knowledge sharing that takes place. Todtling, Lehner and Trippl (2006) found in knowledge-intensive firms such as biotechnology, pharmaceuticals and information and communication technologies (ICTs), that there is a very strong reliance on codified or codifiable knowledge. As far as codified knowledge is concerned the focus is on scientific principles and methods; knowledge processes are formally organized and knowledge outcomes tend to be documented. Tacit knowledge is less well understood. In order to be innovative, knowledge-intensive firms need to ensure an effective relationship between codified and tacit knowledge (Johnson, Lorenz & Lundvall, 2002).

There are differences in the bases of knowledge in knowledge-intensive firms. Asheim and Gertler (2005) distinguish between synthetic and analytical knowledge bases. Synthetic knowledge bases focus on the novel application of existing

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