



## Chapter IX

# The Role of Ambiguity in the Transfer of Knowledge within Organizational Networks

Jennifer Priestley, Kennesaw State University, USA

Subhashish Samaddar, Georgia State University, USA

---

### Abstract

---

*Organizations join multi-organizational networks in part to mitigate environmental uncertainties and to access knowledge. However, the transfer of knowledge cannot be assumed simply as a function of network membership. Researchers in the area of knowledge management have identified several factors that have been found to affect the transfer of knowledge within, between, and among organizations. This chapter investigates specifically how organizational ambiguity impacts the transfer of knowledge within multi-organizational networks. The authors explore the effects of causal ambiguity, defined as the ambiguity related to inputs and factors, in a multi-organizational context, and discuss the existence of a previously undefined ambiguity, the ambiguity related to outcomes or "outcome ambiguity." The authors provide a discussion on why outcome ambiguity is particularly relevant when multiple organizations are engaged in a network, where the objective is access to knowledge.*

## Introduction

---

Firms engaged in *multi-organizational networks* have been found to benefit from network-wide *knowledge transfer* and sharing which may not be available to a non-networked firm operating independently (Argote, 1999; Darr, Argote, & Epple, 1995; Dyer, 1997). However, membership alone does not guarantee the transfer of knowledge among networked entities. The degree to which transfer occurs can be contingent upon member organizations' ability to remove or abate systemic constraints (Argote, 1999) or *isolating mechanisms* (Knott, 2002). One of these constraints is represented by the *ambiguities* or uncertainties that can be present when multiple organizations become involved in knowledge transfer. Ambiguities can make the transfer of knowledge difficult (Knott, 2002; Mosakowski, 1997), thereby mitigating some of the expected benefits of network participation.

It should be noted that a multi-organizational network is more complex to study than is an intra-organizational or dyadic setting. Simmel (1950), who studied social relationships, found that social triads (and relationships involving more than three entities) had fundamentally different characteristics than did dyads. First, there is no majority in a dyadic relationship. In any group of three or more, an individual organization can be pressured by the others to suppress their individual interests for the interests of the larger group, making the manifestation of the governance structure and internal competitiveness of such networks complex and their influences on knowledge transfer interesting but difficult to understand. The fact that organizations have more bargaining power in a dyad than in a network, and the fact that a network can offer more gaming possibilities, can confound such difficulty. If one member withdraws from a dyad, the dyad disappears; this is not true in a network. Finally, third parties represent alternative and moderating perspectives when disagreements arise. As a result of these differences, multi-organizational networks are more complex, and relevant ambiguities in knowledge transfer may play out differently at the network level than at an intra-organizational or dyadic level.

Informed by the knowledge management and organizational management literature regarding ambiguity, this chapter will begin with a discussion of *causal ambiguity* and how it has been shown to affect knowledge transfer in an intra-organizational context. Based upon this discussion, logical extensions will be made regarding how causal ambiguity would be expected to affect knowledge transfer within an interorganizational network context. This chapter will then make the argument that general discussions on ambiguity, including specific discussions on causal ambiguity, still leave a conceptual gap regarding the ambiguities related to ultimate outcomes that networked organizations would be expected to experience as a result of transferring knowledge outside of their boundaries. In response, the factor of *outcome ambiguity* will be described in an effort to address this gap in the extant literature. Finally, the developments in this chapter are discussed, with an emphasis on raising issues of interest to both researchers engaged in organizational learning and knowledge management, as well as to practitioners engaged in human resources and in management of entities within multi-organizational networks.

7 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/role-ambiguity-transfer-knowledge-within/24890](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/role-ambiguity-transfer-knowledge-within/24890)

## Related Content

---

### Can You Feel It?: Effectiveness of Anxiety Cues for the Design of Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy

Jessica Morton, Jolien De Letter, Anissa All, Tine Daeseleire, Barbara Depreeuw, Kim Haesen, Lieven De Marez and Klaas Bombeke (2021). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-17).

[www.irma-international.org/article/can-you-feel-it/298983](http://www.irma-international.org/article/can-you-feel-it/298983)

### Public Relations and Advertising in the Context of E-Sports

Tina Tomazic, Luka Druksand Noemia Bessa Vilela (2019). *Intimacy and Developing Personal Relationships in the Virtual World* (pp. 84-95).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/public-relations-and-advertising-in-the-context-of-e-sports/207919](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/public-relations-and-advertising-in-the-context-of-e-sports/207919)

### Framework for Stress Detection Using Thermal Signature

S. Vasavi, P. Neeharica, M. Poojitha and T. Harika (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-25).

[www.irma-international.org/article/framework-for-stress-detection-using-thermal-signature/214986](http://www.irma-international.org/article/framework-for-stress-detection-using-thermal-signature/214986)

### Virtual Metaplasticity (Ars Metaplastica)

Gianluca Mura (2011). *Metaplasticity in Virtual Worlds: Aesthetics and Semantic Concepts* (pp. 1-26).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/virtual-metaplasticity-ars-metaplastica/50375](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/virtual-metaplasticity-ars-metaplastica/50375)

### Gendered Experiences of Mobile Gaming and Augmented Reality: Engagement with Pokémon Go among University Students

William Goette, Julie A. Delello and Rochell R. McWhorter (2019). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 54-67).

[www.irma-international.org/article/gendered-experiences-of-mobile-gaming-and-augmented-reality/239898](http://www.irma-international.org/article/gendered-experiences-of-mobile-gaming-and-augmented-reality/239898)