

## Chapter XVIII

# Managing Knowledge Diversity in Distributed Organizational Structures

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Knowledge in organizations can be compared with human memory. There is no unique place for creating and conserving knowledge. Knowledge in multinationals realizes its potential with various tools of management. The diversity of tools leads to the issue of coordinating levels of management. How can one manage different tools of KM without disrupting the knowledge creating process? To address this issue we analyze several knowledge management strategies of high-technology industries (computer, telecommunications, and pharmacy). In these cases diversity encourages implementation of knowledge management tools. The precision of these tools indicates the firm's competence in managing and diffusing knowledge. An important conclusion that can be drawn is that several factors (redundancy, diversity, discussion, and duration) can reinforce these competences and, in fact, network mechanisms in organizations.*

*As a result, the management community has come to realize that what an organization and its employees know is at the heart of how the organization functions. (Davenport & Prusak, 1998)*

## **INTRODUCTION: EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

### **The Field of Knowledge Management**

Knowledge in organizations can be compared with human memory. There is no single place for creating and conserving knowledge. Consequently it is essential to take account of the full diversity of existing modes of knowledge.

Several studies have emphasized the need to develop knowledge management in order to make use of an organization's cognitive heritage (Nonaka, 1990). Thus knowledge management is inevitably contingent, since it must be tailored to each firm's structures and processes (Tsoukas, 1996). These studies also underscore the diversity of ways in which knowledge can be managed, capitalized, diffused, and combined (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The question is to ascertain how the various resources required to accumulate and diffuse

knowledge can be linked together. Like Tsoukas (1996), we know that "the knowledge firms need to draw upon is also inherently indeterminate." It is not that knowledge is 'out there' in bits and pieces and just needs to be collected and assembled in one encyclopedic database.

Approaches to the nature of knowledge and the modes of knowledge management are proliferating. Several recent syntheses (Management Science, 2003; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003) have described the epistemological and methodological differences between the various approaches.

Like Davenport, DeLong, and Beers (1998), we know that "knowledge is information combined with experience, context, interpretation and deliberation." This is a reminder not to ignore the contextualized nature of knowledge. "Knowledge is constructed and functions through a process of productive cooperation among individuals as well as through interactions between those individuals and the cognitive devices within which they operate" (Poitou, 1997). Cognitive devices are defined as "organised and consolidated sets of intellectual objects,<sup>1</sup> linked to each other and arranged spatially for the purpose of producing goods or knowledge" (Poitou, 1997).

Knowledge management is usually described as a process (Swan, 1999) that can take several paths:

*Table 1. Comparison of Simoni's (2005) three approaches to knowledge management*

	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
<b>Objectification Approaches</b>	Expert systems Knowledge systems Project memories	Specific approach to the capitalization of knowledge	Cost/utility ratio Local in nature
<b>Socialization Approaches</b>	Communities of practice	Knowledge management practices arise out of practices and interactions	Conceptual Operational
<b>Organizational Approaches</b>	Multimodal approach Action on contexts	Integrative and diversified	Poorly differentiated nature of the processes involved Developed for knowledge creation

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