Chapter 92
Knowledge Transfer

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INTRODUCTION

The term *knowledge transfer* (KT) is often used in a generic sense to include any exchange of knowledge between or among individuals, teams, groups, or organizations, whether intended or unintended. The broad spectrum of the concept does not always rule out other related concepts including knowledge sharing, knowledge flow, and knowledge diffusion (van Wijk, Janse & Lyles, 2008), causing some confusion in the literature.

For the most part, however, knowledge transfer, as it has been formally studied, reflects intended, uni-directional exchange between a "source" and a "recipient" (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Nonaka, 1994; Glassop, 2002). For instance, KT occurs when an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system consultant transfers implementation knowledge to a potential user of a system, or when a franchiser's training team transfers knowledge about how to operate a retail store to a franchisee's team. Such knowledge transfers are between a clearly- defined source and a recipient, have a focus, and have a clearly identified objective.

Although this unidirectional, focused, objective-oriented view is widely held among those who have a professional or academic interest in the KT process, there are different schools of thought concerning exactly when transfer can be said to have taken place between a source and a recipient. Some adopt the view that knowledge

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must both be communicated and applied before it has been transferred; others take the view that if the recipient of knowledge has the knowledge and the capacity to apply it, transfer has occurred. Still, others assume that if it has been cognitively transferred (e.g., understood), it has been transferred. Even the most limited case of knowledge that has merely been placed in the possession of a recipient may sometimes be used. Each of these viewpoints appears to be useful in certain circumstances, so there is no universal agreement on which is best.

However, it is generally agreed that knowledge transfer is different from knowledge sharing, which may be an unfocused exchange among individuals or groups who have little intention to send or receive knowledge (For further discussion of this difference, see the article titled "Knowledge Sharing"). Of course, knowledge sharing need not always be unfocused as when persons engage in a brainstorming group session in order to generate new ideas.

Perhaps the best way to conceptualize knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing, two processes that are sometimes confused, is to think of them as being at the two ends of a spectrum. The knowledge transfer end represents a process that is formalized, has a clearly -defined purpose, and is unidirectional. The knowledge-sharing end may be multi-directional, informal, with no clear objective and few rules. Between these extremes lies a wide range of possible combinations of processes involving individuals, teams, groups, organizational units, and organizations. Different people may use different terminology to describe these possible situations, but the end points are well grounded in theory and in practice.

Information technology enables both knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer by facilitating various knowledge activities including knowledge encoding and decoding, storing, and application. For knowledge sharing, the employment of communication platforms such as wikis, forums, email lists and online chat rooms are common; for knowledge transfer, a dedicated and effective communication channel is critical to success. In both cases, Internet and telecommunication technologies are often the fundamental enablers of the processes.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge that is transferred may be either tacit, explicit, or a combination of both (Nonaka, 1994; Gourlay, 2006). When a master craftsman works to develop the skill and knowledge of an apprentice, he is transferring tacit knowledge. When a physician highlights a finding in a medical research paper and sends it to an associate, she is transferring explicit knowledge. When an ERP consultant shows a potential system user how to use tools and tables to implement a system, he or she is transferring a combination of tacit and explicit knowledge.

Knowledge transfer is very important because without it, every problem-solving approach or operating skill would have to be reinvented each time that the knowledge is needed. Indeed, it may not be overstating the case to say that knowledge transfer is a fundamental process of civilization. Certainly, it is the focus of formal education, which is critical to advancement.

As treated here, knowledge transfer is the communication of knowledge from a source so that it is learned and applied by a recipient (Argote, 1999; Argote & Ingram, 2000; Darr & Kurtzberg, 2000). The source and recipient may be individuals, groups, teams, organizational units, or entire organizations in any combination.

Knowledge is usually defined as a justified belief that increases an individual's capacity to take effective action (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Explicit knowledge is transmittable in formal, systematic language. Tacit knowledge "dwells in a comprehensive cognizance of the human mind and body" (Nonaka, 1994).

One of the central tenets of KT relates to