

Chapter 20

Facilitating Knowledge Transfer and the Achievement of Competitive Advantage with Corporate Universities: An Exploratory Model Based on Media Richness and Type of Knowledge to be Transferred

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge literature suggests that transferring knowledge leads to synergistic cost advantages, better implementation of organizational strategies, and competitive advantage. Organizations are implementing corporate universities to aid in knowledge transfer. There is no standardized definition for corporate universities, but rather models that allow organizations to customize them to meet their training needs. Building on recent work of managing the knowledge transfer process (Murray & Peyrefitte, 2007) and on seminal work on media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), the authors propose that the type of knowledge to be transferred, and the appropriate media to transfer that knowledge, determine the most beneficial generation of corporate university to achieve competitive advantage. The chapter presents a model and propositions concerning relationships between the type of knowledge to be transferred, appropriate media selection, and generation of corporate university to implement.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing environment, learning for firms is ultimately about staying in business (Miller, Stewart, & Walton, 1999; Sumner, 2003). "Finding ways to embed knowledge in organizational processes and documents, to distribute information and know-how in readily-accessible forms, and to disseminate knowledge and accelerate learning are key challenges facing organizations," (Mohrman & Lawler, 1998, p.438). The ultimate challenge lies in exploiting the knowledge that we have at a faster rate than our competitors (Mohrman & Lawler, 1998).

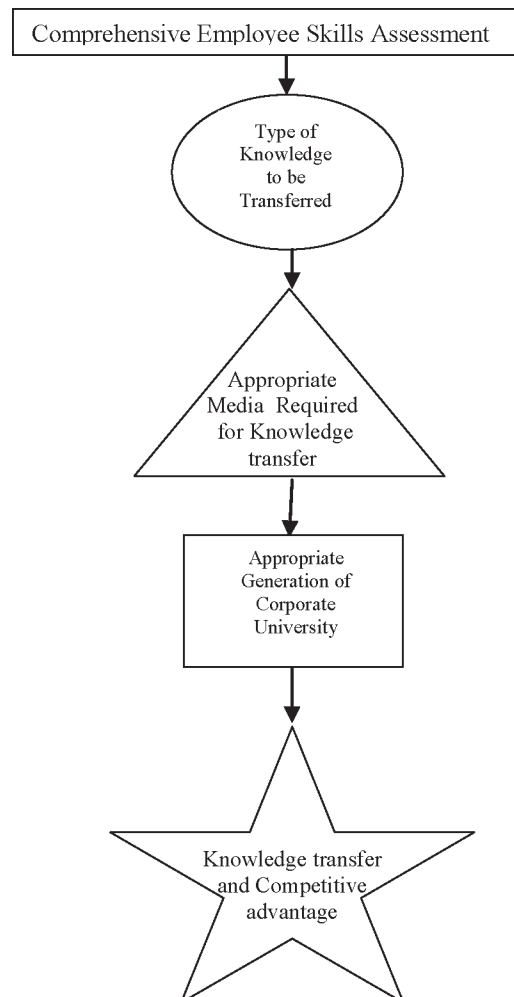
Research has suggested that knowledge is the primary ingredient in gaining a competitive advantage (e.g., Li, Shen, & Xi, 2010; Subashini, 2010; Chilton & Bloodgood, 2008; Eldin & Hamza, 2009; Mohammadi, Khanlari, & Sohrabi, 2009; Gnyawali, Stewart, & Grant, 1997; Kogut & Zander, 1992) and that knowledge is a firm's main inimitable resource (Grant, 1996). In order for firms to maximize the competitive advantage arising from knowledge, knowledge must be effectively transferred within organizations (Li, Shen, & Xi, 2010; McDonnell, Gunnigle & Lavelle, 2010).

The authors propose that an appropriately designed corporate university can maximize the transfer of corporate knowledge. As illustrated in Figure 1, when designing a corporate university, both the type of knowledge to be transferred and the most appropriate type of media for that transfer must be considered.

The development of a corporate university represents a high-profile, creative corporate commitment both to knowledge transfer and to producing strategic advantages by providing faster learning than the competition (Miller, Stewart, & Walton, 1999; Allen, 2002). Additionally, corporate universities lengthen the shelf life of knowledge and help align training with strategic business goals (Sunoo, 1998).

Corporate universities are vital to the individual employee as well. In the new, flexible, decentralized organizational structure, responsibility and authority are pushed downward and all employees are expected to make decisions and to contribute to competitive advantage. This organization requires a new breed of workers, ones who can think and do for themselves (Estrada, 1995). As such, advanced education and continuous learning are crucial (Allerton, 1998). The key goal for an organization is

Figure 1. Relationship between type of knowledge to be transferred, appropriate media required for knowledge transfer, appropriate generation of corporate university necessary for achieving knowledge transfer and competitive advantage



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