

Chapter 1.22

Transnational Knowledge Transfer

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INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes a globalised economic network, cross-country knowledge transfer is an emerging phenomenon. It happens not only through Multi-National Corporations (MNC) or joint ventures, but also in dispersed organizations or individuals. Knowledge transfer is a critical part of knowledge management and is a complex process that is affected by many factors. Research into knowledge sharing and transfer within an organisation (intra) and between organisations (inter) has produced useful insight into the process and the model of effective knowledge transfer, and the factors affecting such a process. Knowledge transfer across different countries – refers to transnational knowledge transfer (TKT) thereafter, has emerged as a new domain of knowledge management that

attracted many researchers. However, the findings on TKT are disproportionate comparing to ample evidence on intra and inter organisational knowledge transfer. It is anticipated that TKT has its own unique features and cannot be simply classified as one of the commonly accepted knowledge transfer categorizations. Therefore, specific attention should be paid to examine knowledge transfer in a cross-country context.

Having witnessed the rapid development and increasing activities in transnational knowledge transfer, this chapter aims to provide a concise overview of research in transnational knowledge transfer. The chapter first defines and clarifies the concepts of knowledge transfer in general, and transnational knowledge transfer in particular. It then reviews and analyses the current research in transnational knowledge transfer in terms of transfer levels, models/frameworks and key influential factors. Future research is discussed and

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managerial implications and practical guideline are provided.

BACKGROUND

Defining Knowledge Transfer

There are many different definitions of knowledge transfer. For example, knowledge transfer is a process through which one unit (e.g. a group, a department, or a division) is affected by the experience of another (Argote & Ingram, 2000), a process of systematically organized exchange of information and skills between entities (Wong, Maher, Nicholson & Bai 2003), or any exchange of knowledge between or among individuals, teams, groups, or organisations (King, 2006). Some scholars (Cummings & Teng 2003; Nonaka & Toyama 2003) use the term ‘knowledge sharing’ rather than knowledge transfer. (Bresman, Birkinshaw & Nobel 1999) argue that there is no definite distinction among knowledge transfer and organizational learning. Although different terms have been used, most of them refer to the management of knowledge that is being transferred or shared at individual, intra-organizational or inter-organizational levels.

Transnational knowledge transfer is knowledge transfer across national boundaries. From an organizational perspective, transnational knowledge transfer can occur in many different forms at individual or organizational level, such as intra-organizational knowledge transfer within an international organization; inter-organizational knowledge transfer within a community or partnership; inter-organizational knowledge transfer among dispersed organizations in different nations, which may be sponsored by third parties such as international charities, international or national governing bodies. In the last few years, an increasing number of TKT projects have been set up aiming to engage developing countries to benefit from the know-how, best practice, inno-

vation and technology advance from developed countries and to facilitate knowledge creation at the local level.

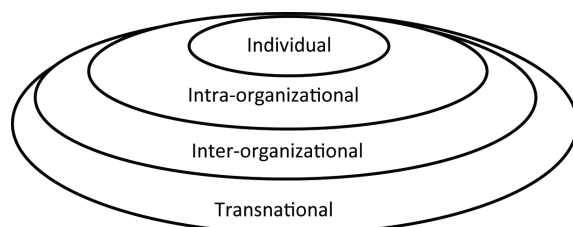
Understanding Knowledge Transfer Levels

Knowledge transfer is one of the most important part of knowledge management, and is often found to be laborious, time consuming, complicated and difficult to understand (Huber 2001; Szulanski, 2000). Knowledge transfer can occur at various levels, i.e. individual, intra-organizational, inter-organizational, or transnational level as shown in Figure 1. At the most basic level, knowledge is possessed, created, shared and leveraged by individuals. Without individuals’ involvement, knowledge cannot be transferred at any other levels.

Knowledge transfer at intra-organizational level views an organization as a systematic entity within which knowledge is created and shared among members. Nonaka (1994) suggests that organizations play a critical role in articulating and amplifying the knowledge that is developed by individuals.

When organizations open their borders to the flows of information and knowledge from outside networks, it engages in inter-organisational knowledge transfer. With sophisticated knowledge codification techniques, knowledge can be easily shared among collaborative organisations, even competitors. Some researchers (Albino, Garavelli

Figure 1. Knowledge transfer levels (Duan, Xu & Fu, 2006)



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