

## Chapter 5

# Negotiating Knowledge Gaps in Dispersed Knowledge Work

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### ABSTRACT

*Reviews from the two streams of research - knowledge based view of the firm and dispersed work – offers evidence for knowledge gaps that exist among dispersed members. Dispersed members therefore cannot take for granted that they have a common context, making dispersed collaboration problematic. A major challenge for such teams is thus to co-create a commonly shared context. This paper examines the process of how dispersed teams negotiate knowledge gaps to create a common context. The study uses a multiple case design on dispersed teams at a knowledge-based marketing organization in the US. The findings from this field study highlight three strategies to negotiate knowledge gaps: (1) active engagement strategies, (2) negotiating relationally, and (3) redundant knowledge structures. Taken together, these findings have the potential to help managers in knowledge based organizations to discern appropriate social and technological interventions that may be needed for conducting dispersed knowledge work.*

### INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, knowledge-based tasks such as new product development are being conducted by geographically dispersed<sup>1</sup> teams since one of the benefits of dispersed<sup>2</sup> teams is the ability of their members to contribute diverse knowledge and expertise (McDonough et al., 2001; Sole & Edmondson, 2002; Maznevski & Athanassiou, 2003). While dispersed work is proliferating, evidence from knowledge-based view of the firm

and geographically dispersed work literatures suggest that at least three kinds of knowledge gaps – transactive memory system, mutual knowledge, and categorization– exist because of the (*dispersed*) *structure of the context*. Dispersed members therefore cannot take for granted that they have a common context making dispersed collaboration problematic (Gluesing et al., 2003).

While research has started to offer us some understanding about the factors such as trust (Peters & Karren, 2009), leadership (Cordery et al., 2009), and appropriate technology use (Baba et al., 2004; Rico & Cohen, 2005; Caballer et

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al., 2005; Curseu, Schalk, & Wessel, 2008) that facilitate creating a common context, what is less understood is the process of 'how' dispersed team members negotiate knowledge gaps to create a common context for collaboration. On the basis of a field study of dispersed teams in a real life context, this paper seeks to examine this process. The findings highlight three strategies to negotiate knowledge gaps: (1) active engagement strategies, (2) negotiating relationally, and (3) redundant knowledge structures. Taken together, these findings have the potential to help managers in discerning appropriate social and technological interventions that may be needed for conducting dispersed knowledge work.

In what follows, the first section presents a review of knowledge based view of the firm and dispersed work literatures. These reviews help delineate the three knowledge gaps that may exist among dispersed team members. The next section presents the research design and offers findings. Finally, I discuss the negotiation strategies that may help create a common context to conduct dispersed knowledge work, followed by implications for business and practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Knowledge-based View of the Firm:* Since the seminal article by Nonaka (1994), researchers have differed in their definition and operationalization of 'knowledge' as a construct. Therefore, alternative thoughts exist as to what knowledge means. A review of the literature along the epistemological dimensions permits one to discern two broad perspectives<sup>3</sup> into which most writing can be classed (Assudani, 2005). In the first perspective, knowledge is viewed as a resource that can be *possessed* (knowledge 'of') or even *created* ('*knowledge from*') by actors and/or the networks in which they participate.

In the second, knowledge is viewed as a *process of doing*- of leveraging and mediating the rela-

tionship between the possession and the creation dimension. Integral to the process perspective is the *exchange*<sup>4</sup> of knowledge. Knowledge exchange is defined as the perceived acquisition or perceived contribution of knowledge (Faraj & Wasko, 2005). However, more recent research has started to question these positivist processes of knowledge exchange as the sole basis for new knowledge creation (Salomon & Martin, 2008), and instead propose that *engagement* of diffused knowledge is crucial for knowledge creation. Engagement is defined as an act whereby the receiver (individual or a team) of embedded information actively uses the information by applying it to specific tasks leading to effective action in the situation where knowledge is relevant (Thompson et al., 2001). Engaging is a by-product of socialization – e.g. talking, listening, telling stories and narrating experiences – to make sense of the information. Forums such as joint interpretive forums allow members to challenge and question each other to make their own perspectives and also to take the perspectives of others (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). This enhances the capability of the team members to generate useful actionable knowledge (Mohrman et al., 2001).

Literature in knowledge based view of the firm has demonstrated that numerous factors facilitate or impede the process. One such factor is the *properties of the knowledge management context* (Argote et al., 2003). Examples of such properties include properties of relationships between units such as interpersonal relationships (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005), properties of units such as absorptive capacity of an individual, a group, or an organization (Malhotra, Gosain, & Sawry, 2005), and properties of knowledge (Inkpen, 2008). *Organizational factors* such as size of the organization (Wijk, Jansen, & Lyles, 2008), regular team meetings (Amabile et al., 2001) and rotating managers in different facilities (Inkpen & Dinur, 1998) also facilitate knowledge exchange.

Another stream of research has offered thought-provoking insights that the exchange of knowl-

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