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The human side of knowledge management: knowledge sharing in a community of practice

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The popularity of Knowledge Management (KM) has increased rapidly from the 1990's, and the subject has become a central topic of management philosophy. KM should be seen within the broader context of the relevant changes taking place in the global economic framework. The literature has suggested that knowledge is socially constructed and inseparable from the communities of practice in which it is supported. At the same time, lifelong learning has become a challenge both at the organisational and at the individual level, and this new emphasis on learning poses challenges for Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals. This study investigates the interpersonal process by which knowledge is shared in the HRD Office's communities of practice of an Italian Bank. The nature of the interpersonal knowledge sharing process is illustrated through a qualitative case study. Key benefits of the interpersonal process are the contextualisation and de-contextualisation activities accomplished at both the demand negotiation

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stage and the knowledge transfer stage. This process utilises the community's shared language, cultural norms, social etiquette to allow knowledge to be transferred meaningfully among those HRD professionals. The interpersonal process enables these professionals to practice, learn and enjoy the sharing experience. The focus of this paper is on the growing importance of networks and the human side of KM, and on the critical need to integrate knowledge and action.

1 Introduction

This paper explores the experience of knowledge sharing (KS) among professionals working in the HRD Office of an Italian Bank, within their communities of practice. It is a paradox that, while so many authorities and commentators on KM have come to the conclusion that KM ultimately depends upon people, it is precisely the 'people' aspect that has been the most neglected in the studies in the field.

This paper aims to contribute to the development of both KM and HRD literature by building a bridge between them. KM has important implications for the management of human resources, particularly in terms of the development of knowledge sharing (Scarbrough, 2003). The focus of this paper is on the growing importance of social interaction in the workplace and the critical need to integrate knowledge and action.

Through this interaction, the construction of knowledge and its integration within professional practices seems to evolve as a function of doing work. The central problem statement of this study is: What are the interpersonal activities by which knowledge is shared among professionals working in the HRD Office of an Italian Bank?

In attempting to answer this question, the theoretical framework for this research is the *practice-based view of knowledge* (Gherardi, 2006) and the concept of *communities of practice* (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). At the core of this theoretical framework is 'practice': how people act and interact with their environments in order to carry out their daily activities in their social setting. Practices are the means through which KS dynamics develop and, therefore, practice is the unit of analysis used here for understanding KS processes among participants. From this perspective, thinking and doing are integrated in knowledgeable practices, the development and use of embodied knowledge in undertaking specific activities (Hislop, 2005). Thus, this research focuses on the socially constructed nature of knowledge at a medium sized Italian Bank, and looks at the KS processes within the HRD Office of that Bank, from the perspective of those professionals.

The difficulty in most KM efforts lies in changing orgainsational cultural practices and people's work habits. It lies in getting people to take time to articulate and share the really good stuff (McDermott, 1999). For sharing to occur, there must be an exchange; a resource must pass between the source and the recipient. Although based on the knowledge of the source, the knowledge

received cannot be identical as the process of interpretation is subjective and is framed by the knowledge of the recipient (Hendriks, 2004). There is growing realisation that KS is critical to knowledge creation, organisational learning and performance achievement. An organisation's ability to effectively leverage its knowledge is highly dependent on its people, who actually create, share, and use that knowledge. KS is basically the act of making knowledge available to others within the organisation (Ipe, 2003).

Based on a review of theory and research related to KS, the following have been identified as the major factors that influence KS between individuals in organisations: *the nature of knowledge; organisational context (culture and climate, management support, rewards and incentives); interpersonal and team characteristics; motivation to share, opportunities to share, and the culture of the work environment* (Ipe, 2003; Wang & Noe, 2010). It should be noted that culture, that is shared values, beliefs and practices of the people in the organisation (Schein, 1985), influences all the other factors. Culture is embedded in the way people act, what they expect of each other and how they make sense of each other's actions.

The particular capabilities of organisations for creating and sharing knowledge derive from a range of factors, including the special facility organisations have for the creation and transfer of tacit knowledge; the organising principles by which individual and functional expertise are structured, coordinated and communicated, and through which individuals cooperate; and the nature of organisations as social communities (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In particular, communities of practice (CoPs) have been of great interest to KM academics due to the ability they appear to have for transferring tacit knowledge within a group of workers through social processes. CoPs operate as *social learning systems* where practitioners connect to solve problems, share ideas, set standards, build tools, and develop relationships with peers and stakeholders (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). An essential dimension of a community of practice is voluntary participation, because, without this, a member is less likely to seek or share knowledge; build trust and reciprocity with others; or employ the community's knowledge in practice. Members' willingness to learn and relate together is what drives value in communities (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

Participation appears to be a key factor in the interpersonal KS process in the HRD Office, as KS can only occur if professionals are prepared to engage with each other. These aspects of motivation and participation are seen as an essential component of making the interpersonal KS process function. In this regard, an interesting perspective is 'social presence' as put forward by Riva *et al.* (2011). Presence can be depicted as a selective and adaptive mechanism which allows an individual to be able to situate herself/himself in a physical and social space by defining her/his own boundaries. Unfortunately, it is not

possible here to analyse further that perspective because of the limited space. Sense making seems to be progressively relevant when analysing the process by which knowledge is shared by HRD professionals. At this stage, it is important to underline the fact that HRD has a strong reliance on knowledge and, particularly, on its tacit dimension. This emphasis on knowledge and learning poses new challenges to HRD professionals. For example, KS has obvious implications for developing people management practices. Such practices, that can locate experts with valuable tacit knowlegde (hence implications for recruitment and selection) and encourage those experts to collaborate and share their knowledge (hence implications for rewards) and retain them within the firm (hence implications for career development, training and appraisal), are critical to managing knowledge (Swan *et al.*, 1999). Studies of learning at the workplace have indicated that, even though formal learning interventions are planned and conducted in order to improve the performance of the organisation, most learning on the job is unplanned, unorganised and informal (Slotte *et al.*, 2004; Ellström, 2011). "*This extends the boundaries of HRD beyond formal training to embrace the promotion of a broad range of learning activities*" (Slotte *et al.*, 2004, p. 484).

Accordingly, the recent debate on the current and future tasks facing HRD professionals regards such questions as to how recognise and improve informal learning in the workplace setting, as well as how to shift the emphasis of HRD activities from formal training to others forms of learning (Slotte *et al.*, 2004). Thus, in order to make a valuable contribution towards the development of knowledge in this area, it is interesting and useful for human resources management (HRM) and KM analysts and practitioners to explore the way in which HRD professionals experience their day-to-day (informal) practices of KS in their community of practice, which is the focus of the next paragraphs.

2 Research Methodology

This paragraph discusses the research design and methodology used in this study to answer the above mentioned research question. It has been suggested that all research is interpretive, because it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

This study adopted a qualitative approach, within the interpretivist paradigm, and used an exploratory case study design, which seemed suitable to research individual practice and to provide rich, contextual information which could contribute to develop a better understanding of the interpersonal KS activities used by HRD professionals. A qualitative inquiry is conducted in a natural setting and

a human, the researcher is the primary instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). There is an emergent design in qualitative research, and meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the participants' realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In order to answer the research question, it was important to understand the phenomena under study in their workplace setting and be able to try to capture and illustrate those phenomena from the perspective of the HRD professionals involved. The tasks and processes performed by HRD professionals in their sharing of knowledge are linked to some particular project or problem, and will occur in the context of their specific community of practice. A case study design, then, was expected to catch the complexity of a single case or particular activity under study (Stake, 1995).

The unit of analysis in this study was practice, that is the KS activities performed by HRD professionals within their community of practice. These professionals formed a community of practice because of their participation in emerging and mutually shared practices, beliefs and understandings over an extended timeframe in the pursuit of some shared enterprises (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Rich data in this context related to data filled with words that revealed the participants' perspectives whilst also communicating their personal interests and attention to subjects.

Thus, interviews were the primary vehicle for data selection, while observation, documents and casual conversation with staff were used as supplements. Interviews may be described as conversations with a purpose (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The fieldwork was conducted at the headquarters of an Italian Bank (ABC). The HRD Office of ABC had 21 full time professionals, and six of them were the participants who took part in this study. I chose to use 'purposeful sampling' which is a non-probabilistic sampling method, so as to select information-rich cases for detailed study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The sample was small because of the limited time and resources of the researcher. Nonetheless, the sample size is, typically, small in qualitative research because it is usual to receive an abundance of rich data (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Indeed, "in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable" (Patton, 2002, p. 244). Moreover, in qualitative research there is no talk about saturation, because meanings are infinite, always expanding and, consequently, "no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description" (Van Manen, 1997, p. 31). Prior to the fieldwork an informed consent from participants was obtained. The raw data selected were processed according to the constant comparative method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). They were used to find meaning through a process of systematic description of the interrelationships called *coding*.

This was an interactive, dynamic, and ongoing process so that the construction of the findings was elaborated. The method chosen to analyse the interview transcript data was *content analysis*. Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of the text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Krippendorff & Bock, 2008). A category is a group of content that shares a commonality (Krippendorff & Bock, 2008). In this study, the categories selected to analyse the interview content were attributed to the text, the code name of the participant, and the authentic transcribed text. Using this format allowed data elaboration employing Microsoft Excel to group data by category or by participant. As recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), transferability was sought through the use of multiple data sources and rich descriptions, though it is difficult to attain in a single-case study (Stake, 1995). For the researcher, prevention of harm and ethical behaviour were primary concerns during the fieldwork activities. All participants and the data generated from their participation were treated with respect, and no individual or organisation was identified in the study, in order to meet privacy and confidentiality issues. No participant was forced or encouraged to continue their involvement, and each was free to withdraw at any time.

2.1 Findings

The main finding of the study is that participants preferred to employ interpersonal KS activities rather than drawing on the Bank's explicit store or use other information technology (IT) devices. In order to account for the community aspect of KS, Hendriks' model (2004) was utilised as enhanced by the same author. This model consists of five stages: awareness, bringing, transfer, receiving, usage. This model is based on the intuitive premise that KS presumes two parties: one who has knowledge and one who gets knowledge. The first party should communicate its knowledge in some form or other (either by acts, by speech, or in writing, etc.), and the other party should be able to perceive these expressions of knowledge and make sense of them. KS will only occur when the involved parties recognise its importance or possible value. Most HRD professionals argued that the process (activities) of KS began with the recognition that a need for new knowledge had arisen (awareness) with comments like this one:

> *Normally I need knowledge after being sent out on a specific task. Being selected to carry out a job does not accordingly mean you have all of the knowledge. This is for me the most common way the need arises to find knowledge.*

The need also arose in the form of a request for help from another professional on a particular task engagement. This happened most often within rela-

tionships that people were comfortable with, either based on ongoing personal connections or in close-knit project groups. A recurrent theme among the participants was the role that their community of practice played in this process, in terms of using a common language, shared concepts and commonly accepted strategies. Having identified a need for new knowledge and its value, HRD professionals then moved to a bringing stage of the interpersonal KS process. The use of personal networks to point those professionals towards the most relevant knowledge was the participants' generally preferred method (bringing). One of them commented: "*The willingness of my colleagues to share knowledge with me is really there, especially if I know them and if I have a professional relationship with them*". All six participants believed that the time taken for the relationship, and mutual trust to develop, contributed positively to how well they worked together with each other. The community's shared models, language, and cultural norms are seen to shape and channel the complex of the KS process. Then, the adaptation, translation and negotiation stage helped to build a common understanding of the knowledge request within the boundaries of the community of practice. At some point in the request negotiation stage the owner (bringer) agrees to share knowledge (*transfer*). This step is the fundamental point of the process. The complexity of the sharing system is activated and the role of the bringer professional as a member of the community of practice is defined. One participant remarked:

> *Frequently the whole process from end to end takes place over a coffee. We sit in a coffee shop and examine my need, the colleague has the knowledge and agrees to give it to me. I then walk out twenty minutes later with a solution to my dilemma.*

Another important issue that emerged from all interviews was the theme of communication and, specifically, face-to-face dialogue. Participants seemed to focus not only on what was shared, but also on the way in which it was shared.

> *A lot of people have little tricks, and it's those tricks that you share. Knowledge, experience, really that's it. Without communication we cannot efficiently finish the job. So it is about sharing knowledge, sharing information, sharing the experience that you just go through with a particular job.*

When the owner (bringer professional) agrees to hand over knowledge, the getter (professional) uses the shared language, norms and values of the community to contextualise that knowledge, adapt it into specific working situations so as to make it directly applicable (*receiving*). That is to say that the getter of the knowledge must have a certain mindset if knowledge itself is to be shared

actively. The desire or the want must be there. In this regard, one participant suggested that:

> *Desire is a side of it too. You have to have the desire or want to tap that information too. I would say it's a need to know. And if someone is not on the same wavelength that you are on, they are not going to pick it up.*

The final step of the interpersonal KS process (activities) began when HRD professionals felt ready to perform the job (usage). One participant noticed that:

> *Once you have reached that stage, you then implement the knowledge. You apply it. It becomes part and parcel of your own knowledge base. You've picked up and internalised that knowledge somehow.*

It appears here is that the HRD professional is not going to go back through the same course of action if something similar comes up again. HRD professionals, depending on their individual learning styles and preferred learning methods, can then develop on this initial base of knowledge over time, and enhance and adapt it through their personal experience and through integrating that knowledge in further KS activities. This action learning process (Schön, 1983) also allows these professionals to reflect on their actions and to acquire feedback from their community, so as to develop their knowledge over time. Once the getter has improved the knowledge received from the bringer professional, the interpersonal KS process has been completed. The getter becomes a source of knowledge for other professionals and generates some more complete comprehension of their own practices. Another finding of this study is that participants did not refuse information technology (IT) solutions and databases completely, they considered them as generally less effective and less useful than personal networks. Stored knowledge was judged hard to find by those professionals, and databases were believed not to be user-friendly. All participants constantly confirmed their preference for personal networks and interpersonal activities. The alternative was drawing knowledge from the explicit store. This included a mixture of intranet, shared directories and documentation associated with projects, such as reports, research, analyses. Many HRD professionals knew where to access the information they needed on the intranet. The most common barrier was the fact that finding information on the intranet was difficult. This meant that in order to get or retrieve the explicit knowledge they needed HRD professionals had to be familiar with a wide range of different systems, applications, and access procedures. This lack of standardisation made it more difficult for them to share explicit knowledge. The participants indicated that very few of them contributed to and pulled out objects from the explicit store,

because of its inability to convert efficiently to the specific context they required.

Finally, all participants recognised that the main reasons for taking part in KS activities within their community of practice were motivation, rewards, trust, and community related aspects. Motivation influenced KS activities and played an important role in getting people involved in the HRD Office initiatives. As participants remarked "*everyone is motivated by different things*", but overall a good working climate appeared to be the key to personal motivation. Rewards also played a significant role in promoting KS, but not simply monetary benefits. For these professionals, rewards meant, mainly, recognition and approval from top management and from peers. The focus was on the intrinsic features of the job and a sense of belonging to the community of practice and to the Bank too. Trust was also mentioned as a necessary condition for sharing knowledge and mostly in connection with overcoming "*turf barriers*". One of them explained:

> *Sometimes what you need to do, particularly when you're talking about breaking down turf barriers, is that you have to acquire a certain level of trust in the group before they can even get to the stage of considering how they're going to work with each other.*

Community related aspects played also an important role in KS activities. Participation in this process occurred in the context of the community of HRD professionals and not in isolation. The community of practice provided the background within which all KS was appreciated and supported the common rules by which the sharing happened. Both the interview and other evidence, such as document analysis and on-site observation, indicated the absence of major barriers to KS (the so-called "information hoarding"). One participant said:

> *I have a sense of community with my (HRD) Office. We are prepared to share knowledge with each other, mostly because you want to have the same chance offered to you. I get an answer for giving and answer. It's a guideline.*

The participants felt to belong to a community in which each member was equal and where it was expected and natural to share knowledge. In this way, the sense of community was promoted and the KS process was preserved.

Conclusions

This research sought to explore the nature of interpersonal KS activities in the HRD Office of an Italian Bank from a practice-based view of knowledge, thereby contributing to the development of both the KM and HRD literatures by building a bridge between them. HRD professionals were selected as the focus

of attention in this research to represent knowledge workers since their tasks are primarily intellectual and creative, and they involve both the utilisation and development of knowledge. This study suggests that HRD professionals prefer to take part in KS activities rather than using stored explicit knowledge. This preference shows the importance of the contextualisation of knowledge within the community of practice where those professionals work. The study also seems to indicate that this is a non-linear process but a creative one, either based on ongoing personal networks or on close-knit project groups. The mediation process accomplished in the interpersonal KS activities helps to coordinate the requesting and the source professional's understanding of each other's mental patterns, and ability to use shared language and the socio-cultural norms of their community. This is in line with the findings of the literature review and the community of practice model (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), as far as knowledge is socially constructed and the crucial success factor is trust. Although participants did not refuse IT solutions and databases completely, they considered them as generally less effective and less useful than personal networks. One implication is that organisations can spread the instinctive preference of professionals and employees for utilising their personal networks to improve their KM system through recognising these networks as a source of the organisation's strength. It is therefore suggested that management should focus on interpersonal KS activities and promote a stronger KS culture within the organisations. Suggestions for future research might include similar studies conducted in other companies and by taking different approaches as well. This study has a number of limitations. First, the number of participants is small and how representative they are of the whole HRD Office is an issue. Further studies may be conducted using a larger sample. The other limitation with this study, and with the research design, is that the goal is restricted to the exploration of meaning behind experiences and processes of KS, and it is not aimed at arriving at positions that can be applied broadly.

To sum up, in order to stimulate some critical thinking it seems feasible to suggest that we should go beyond KM "*... towards a more humane organisation where attention needs to be paid to social processes of dialogue, openness, diversity, tolerance, uncertainty, complexity, trust, relationships, reflection, reframing, restoration and reflexivity*" (Garvey & Williamson, 2002, p. 184). This is my hope too.

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