

# Knowledge Sharing Practices: Analysis of a Global Scandinavian Consulting Company

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**Abstract:** In a knowledge economy landscape, successful global consulting firms are the ones putting focus on effectively and efficiently organising and managing the highly distributed diversified knowledge in the organisation. In order to sustain their competitive advantage, knowledge-companies need to harness knowledge and to analyse knowledge sharing mechanisms and learning in the whole organisation. Knowledge sharing in global firms is not only a cross-department process but it should also take place within the same department. It is well recognised that the knowledge sharing mechanism is a highly complex process to put in place and to promote in the organisation. The primary goal of our research is to empirically investigate knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms within a global consulting company. The phenomenology discipline has guided our research methodology because it is the most appropriate approach for coping with the social complexity of management and business. Our research approach intends to make social sense from the knowledge sharing practices and observations conducted in order to understand how and what is shared.

**Keywords:** Knowledge sharing, learning organisation, phenomenology, information communication technology, culture, empirical knowledge sharing investigation

## 1. Introduction

Due to a changing business environment today, organisations are facing challenges of global competitiveness. Furthermore, organisations are confronted more and more with issues such as fast technological changes, product lifecycle shortened, downsizing, high market volatility. In order to cope with these challenges, organisations need to be able to manage highly distributed diversified knowledge. Challenges rely on the identification of crucial knowledge that improves the business process. Knowledge is central but even more so is the understanding of the knowing process, and the learning and knowledge transfer/sharing process (Küpers, 2005, Apostolou, 1999). Companies understanding the need to harness knowledge are aware about the crucial issue of creating a work environment that fosters knowledge sharing mechanisms and learning capabilities within and across organisations. It is well recognized that knowledge-sharing mechanisms are highly complex processes to promote in the organisation (Allix, 2003). Indeed knowledge-sharing hostility is perceived rather as a phenomenon that widely dominates organizational reality (Husted, 2002, Gupta, 2004).

Despite the large amount of literature about knowledge management practices from researchers and practitioners, knowledge sharing mechanisms still require to be understood (Hansen, 1999, De Long, 2000). Indeed, there is still a need to undertake further empirical study in analysing the role of knowledge sharing process

as a vital key for a successful knowledge management in organisations. Investigation of diversified cases studies is required in order to get an in-depth account of knowledge sharing processes, organisational culture, trust and technological components and how they can possibly interact with each other (Dixon, 2002b).

The primary goal of our research is to empirically investigate knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms in a global Scandinavian consulting company. Our original study is based on the phenomenology approach, which examines various structures of experiences ranging from perception, social and linguistic activity involving meanings, communication, understanding, mood, etc. (Banning, 1995).

Phenomenology is particularly well suited to social complexity of business and management by providing observable indicators. Phenomenology as a discipline is related to other key disciplines in philosophy, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics (Smith, 2003). Therefore this multidimensional approach is used to develop a complex account of awareness of everyday activities performed in the life-organisation and with focus on understanding the knowledge sharing mechanisms. Our study intends to classify, describe, interpret and analyse structures of people's experiences in order to specify a generic knowledge-sharing framework taking into account organizational and social dimensions. The present paper focuses on identifying organisational factors impacting on the knowledge

sharing process within and across-departments in a global Scandinavian consulting company.

The next section of this paper presents a literature review on knowledge management and the related topics of knowledge sharing concepts and learning organisations. Section three outlines the organisational context of study and the adopted research methods. In section four, data analysis is discussed.

## **2. Knowledge and knowledge managements concepts**

### **2.1 Background**

It is well recognised today that knowledge is one of the most competitive resource for the dynamic global business environment (Sharif, 2005). Indeed, in recent years companies have strongly focused on organising creating, transferring, searching, sharing Knowledge under the roof so-called Knowledge Management (Hildreth, 2002). On the other side, the multidisciplinary academic world such as philosophy, sociology, computer science have generated a large amount of publications on various perspectives and dimensions of knowledge management (Davenport, 1996, Davis, 2002).

It is usually agreed that there is no common definition of knowledge but let's recall some of the popular definitions. "Knowledge is justified true belief that increases an individual's capacity to take action" (Ayer, 1956). Davenport (2000) defines knowledge as "a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information". According to (Brooking, 1999) knowledge is defined "as information in context with understanding to applying that knowledge". The wide-based knowledge definitions highlight there are several forms of knowledge; tacit, explicit, implicit and systemic knowledge at the individual, group and organisational levels (Davenport, 2000, Dixon, 2002a, Polanyi, 1958, Nonaka, 1995, Inkpen, 1996).

Explicit knowledge has a tangible dimension that can be easily captured, codified and communicated. It and can be shared through discussion or by writing it down and stored into repositories, documents, notes, etc. Examples might include a telephone directory, an instruction manual, or a report of research findings. In contrast, tacit knowledge is linked to personal perspectives, intuition, emotions, beliefs, know-how, experiences and values. It is intangible and not easy to articulate, so it tends to be shared

between people through discussion, stories and personal interactions.

The management of explicit or tacit knowledge consists of performing one or several of the knowledge processes such as transferring, creating, integrating, combining and using knowledge. It is acknowledged that knowledge sharing is a nebulous concept very important for harnessing knowledge (Petersen, 2002, Little, 2002) and thus requires a holistic approach. Studies have focused either on knowledge sharing inter-organisations (Husman, 2001) or inter-units in a firm (Davis, 2002).

Knowledge sharing is not well defined in the literature partially because the research area have not been very active. Knowledge sharing has been defined as providing one's knowledge to others as well as receiving knowledge from others (Dixon, 2002b, Davenport, 2000, Bircham-Connolly, 2005). A more pragmatic description of knowledge sharing is "the process through which one unit is affected by the experience of another" (Argote, 2003). We adopt the following definition of (Willem, 2002), "Knowledge sharing process is defined as exchange of knowledge between at least two parties in a reciprocal process allowing reshaping and sense-making of the knowledge in the new context".

Today, many organisations are concerned about how organizational members share their knowledge and accordingly have set up some incentives to motivate them to make their knowledge available to the organisation or to retrieve knowledge stored in the corporate repositories when needed (Gupta, 2004).

The literature study shows us that they are several models for knowledge sharing (Petersen, 2002). The sharing knowledge forms with direct interaction between people or indirect interaction through the document creation. However, analysis of knowledge sharing practices shows that reluctance to share is dominating the organisational reality (Husted, 2002, Willem, 2003).

Factors affecting the behaviour of knowledge sharing have been quite heavily investigated (Wasko, 2000, Ardichvili, 2003). However, most of studies have focused either on social or technological dimensions. Few studies integrating the both dimensions have been conducted (Fu, 2005). Accordingly, our research project intends to analyse the sharing process integrating both dimensions based on the phenomenology approach described below.

## 2.2 Methodology of study

Knowledge sharing is a context-embedded process making its measurement difficult; there is so far no standard method to measure the sharing process. We have at first stage investigated the most appropriated research methodologies available. There are several qualitative research methodologies available such as ethnography, narrative inquiry, ethno-methodology, grounded theory, and phenomenology.

With the aim of understanding knowledge flow between people and being able to provide a correct interpretation of complex social structures within the study group, we have decided to perform qualitative observational research into the nature of group behaviours. Accordingly, we took an empirical approach based on observations of the behaviour of individuals or groups in their knowledge sharing and learning processes. We have opted for a dynamic approach updating accounts of observations on multiple levels of individual/group interactions.

The Phenomenology discipline has guided our research methodology because it is the most appropriate approach coping with the social complexity of business and management. This approach sets the research in a social context and with an idea to try to make social sense from observations. This should give us a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms embodied in individual and group behaviour by being aware of what and why things are occurring.

Furthermore, the flexibility of this discipline facilitates the discovery of the reality of a situation or the reality behind a situation (Saunders, 2000). This is a major element to take in account in Knowledge management since the study context is highly dependant on several domains as stated by (Furlong, 2001) (i) personnel characteristics and experience of the knowledge worker, (ii) socio-technico and environmental facilitators or inhibitors to organisation development and in particular with regard to knowledge sharing process, (iii) organisational culture.

Our research study is based on long-term observation (10 months) of a group with participation in that group. Observations of the working practices in context should foster the perception of elements that could have been omitted or simply not even considered if we have focused only on outcomes of the interviews. The underlying pragmatic research aims to conduct observations on what is being shared, why it is shared, how it is shared and who is sharing.

The empirical investigations seek to explore individual or group behaviours with the idea to grasp the organisational culture and see how people are interacting while working. For the first study, we have restraint our investigation to only two locations in the organisation. However, at a later stage, we aim to extend our study to the whole organisation.

Several focused and semi-structured interviews have been conducted with different managers and knowledge workers focusing especially on some specific Knowledge sharing mechanisms that help us to understand the sharing process beyond simple organisational anecdotes. We have performed various sessions of cyclic observations.

A set of indicators generated from the observation phase has been identified. The evolution of those indicators had been recorded in a grid. We are planning to complete our study with a survey of knowledge worker practices at a more organisational level.

In addition, we have collected and analysed a variety of corporate documents including reports, internal notes, knowledge repositories content, papers, minutes. It provided a more comprehensive picture of Knowledge sharing process.

By the end of our empirical investigation, we should be able to answer our fundamental global research question: "What are the indicators that facilitate or inhibit knowledge sharing mechanisms?"

Analysis and interpretation (Hermeneutics) of collected data are subject to the cognitive skill and current thinking of the researcher/observer (Agostini, 2000). Accordingly, the elaborated model does not definitely reflect all the aspects and dimensions of this highly complex of Knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms. Furthermore the selected indicators might enlighten only some perspectives of those mechanisms. Therefore, further research works should be conducted in order to confirm or refute the result of our study.

## 3. Organisational context: Global Scandinavian consulting firm

### 3.1 Organizational requirements specification and analysis

The research study is conducted within a global Scandinavian consulting firm supporting businesses in 60 countries. The company provides competitive and scalable services with

global coverage within the areas of desktop management file and print services, user administration, software distribution, license control, inventory, anti-virus, end-users support all in multiple languages. The organisation employs more than 600 people and when needed they supply with external consultants.

The company as an intensive knowledge firm is project-based and is distributed over geographical location. The diversified skilled consultants are highly mobile working at the client site. Consulting activities dominate their business activity. Therefore one main challenge for the top management is to keep tracks of the consultants activities, who are spread locally (customer sites), regionally or worldwide. Furthermore, the company is facing the problem of knowledgeable employees leaving the firm either through early retirement, better job offers, buy-outs or other reasons.

In order to deal with those issues, the company have instigated some Knowledge management initiatives. Undertaken initiatives encompass building huge corporate knowledge repositories, set up of collaborative tools, knowledge mapping, open office landscape configuration, coaching, training in order to foster the Knowledge sharing processes and learning.

However the preliminary analysis of the collected data shows that Knowledge management and learning processes are not managed at a formal organisational level but rather is a spontaneous activity embodied in a daily work

### 3.2 Findings

Although the study is still ongoing, preliminary analysis of typical working daily practices has already given us an understanding of the potential factors to consider such as type of the shared Knowledge, its quality/relevance, transfer speed, sender and receiver perspectives (absorptive capacity), culture, trust, motivation, working environment.

For the purpose of our study and in the context of the consulting company, we have identified and classified three types of corporate knowledge such explicit, tacit and implicit. It was important to make this distinction since the knowledge sharing processes might be supported differently (Ardichvili, 2003). According to the nature of knowledge, knowledge sharing concepts are based on general framework where tacit knowledge or skills of people is shared through formal and informal networks and explicit knowledge through systems, knowledge repositories, and documentation exploitations.

Based on the information and knowledge gathered through interviews and observations, we can deduct that there is a lack of inter-project exchange of knowledge and the knowledge workers based at the client site have very little opportunity to meet, socialize and informally discuss topics of interest. Although informal networks of people have emerged in order to share crucial knowledge or expertise necessary for carrying out working daily activities, those communities in place are rather seen as many close clusters within the organisation with specific tools or common informal business rules. It results in the organisation many small islands of expertise that is framed into the specific business areas. The observation described below confirms how much it is important to share experience.

*Obsv1: "Newly employed backup wanted to install a new driver for the IBM Tivoli program as a solution to the Overlay problem with the WinDVD prog*

*ram, but one co-worker present and working on a daily base remember that someone had previously tried this manipulation and that it has engendered some problems. So he advised to not install the drive until he had talked to worker that had done it before. It turned out that after some discussions that the installation of the new driver will make the laptop unusable and will lead to the reinstallation of the whole operating system".*

Furthermore, this observation shows how much the informal network and the location of expertise are important to the efficiency of the business.

However due to the consulting nature of the business, the finding shows that If an experienced worker is not present locally, an employee tends to solve once again a problem that had occurred before, thus leading to the concept "reinventing the wheel" and consuming time on something that have been previously solved.

In order to overcome this known problem, the management has pushed knowledge repositories building. Still there is no obvious evidence that people will investigate if the knowledge is available in repositories or find what they are looking for or even contribute to update the repositories. This is due to several reasons; for example, we observed some situations where quite often, employee has been spending part of the day looking for information that has been misplaced. Furthermore, people based in a same location tend rather to ask each other instead of using the collaborative tools or the repositories.

*Obs2: "One day, there was an urgent need for expertise on ADSL routers and the worker was not able to find it in the local environment, after some checking he learnt that the person having the expertise was in vacation. Since the client could not wait, he had to spend many hours solving it by trying and failing. The client's problem was a new type of issues and there was too little information in the knowledge repository. However after solving it, the employee didn't make input after the log either."*

Indeed, we have noticed that some users are still sceptical to make knowledge available for others. And for the one willing to contribute to the repositories building or repositories, publishing is seen as a strenuous activity and time consuming. Some employees perceive codification as a strong burden and the resistance to exploit optimally the repositories reflects it. A major claim from the employee is related to the lack of time, since there is a high pressure on the number of working hours with clients (7,5 hours per day).

It has been as well reported that the large variety of tools available in the company might actually slow down the transfer of the knowledge on top of increasing difficulties to maintain the overview of the used tools. When an employee uses a tool in a process, this tool alters the way the process is being performed and adds to the alignment with the company's way of working. Some of the tools that are being used today for knowledge management are the CRM system (CPSS) and E-Support, which is linked into this by a database search function (Helping Hand). Historically this database was only used in Lotus Notes when this was considered the only collaborative tool. Interviewing the management in the Communication and Information department revealed that much of the effort of the department went to the use of intranet and IBM Lotus Domino Document Manager, which organizes documents and provides a lot of possibilities for collaborative work.

The organisation is promoting an open office with flexible workstations as a means to foster the tacit knowledge sharing amongst workers. The physical space and layout influence the way in which employees move around in the organization and thus whom they interact with during the day (Petersen, 2002). There is often more than one team located in one room. This enables cross-team communication on an informal level and can result in faster solutions to the question at hand. As stated by Davenport (2000), the best enabler for knowledge transfer is to hire smart people and let them talk to each. The following observation seems to confirm the decision.

*Obs3: "The computer support team are working in an open space. A worker got a call from a client explaining that he spilled some cola on his keyboard. The employee did not know how to handle this request, so he asked his colleague from another team sitting next to him. He got the information that he should address this problem to 'installation team'. By chance, a person from this team was sitting in the room., He decided to take over of the case, and registered it in the log-system (CPSS). He called back the client informing him that in this case, he had to order a new keyboard. The support worker didn't understand why the client had to change the keyboard until he got the technical explanation from the installation team a bit later".*

In this specific case, the solution was quickly fixed and it was mainly thanks to the open space that let people communicate and cooperate easily and faster. In general, this type of open environment is well perceived by people working on customer supports where there is a strong need to know who to ask if, the worker do not know how to handle the request of the customer.

However during the interviews, it has been mentioned that working in an open office can be considered as an hindrance to perform their daily tasks quicker since they are many interruptions and people exchanging thoughts and reflections can slower the working pace and might been seen rather time consuming. In addition, there is the problem of noise and questions of inefficiency. People working at the customer support service unit receive several calls from the clients and in order to be able to concentrate on the description of the problem, the worker might take his phone and isolate himself in an empty room, however if he needs to check some data on the computer he might have to come back to his desk.

Furthermore, occasionally, some people stayed longer at the working place only to be able to accomplish their tasks in a quieter environment, they feel that it was only at that time they can concentrate on their work. Though when the managers are sharing the same open office with the knowledge workers, it has been observed, the communication and moves between employees are reduced drastically, creating a quieter environment however may be with less interaction between employees.

In addition to observations, analysis of gathered data led to identification of crucial behavioural indicators influencing the knowledge sharing process such trust, attitude of the sender and receiver, mood, opportunistic behaviour. Those

indicators are grouped as “social capital” of the organisation.

Other indicators that play important role in fostering knowledge sharing process are related to proper rewards and incentives. It has been mentioned several times during interviews that introducing such mechanisms will encourage employee's attitude to be more positive toward knowledge sharing. Knowledge workers are more likely to participate in knowledge management activities if recognized or even rewarded financially.

The fundamental issues for the managers are to set up strategies that will facilitate knowledge sharing. Therefore, it is important to understand what are the indicators facilitating or inhibiting the sharing process.

#### 4. Conclusion

Today task independency that workers have to perform requires a flow of information and a high level of knowledge sharing. This would imply appropriate approaches to transfer tacit knowledge such as communities of practice at a more organisational level or use of adequate

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technology to support the codification, storage, organisation, and retrieval of knowledge.

Our study has explored some of the mechanisms and issues related to knowledge sharing process in a global consulting firm. Even if the organisation has implemented some knowledge management strategies, our investigation shows that knowledge management practice is still not an obvious organisational reality. Therefore, management needs to understand better the factors that facilitate knowledge sharing activities.

Our research study indicates those socio-technical environmental indicators such as shared knowledge, its quality/relevance, transfer speed, sender and receiver perspectives (absorptive capacity), culture, trust, motivation, incentive; and environment play an important role in improving the knowledge sharing process.

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