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Fostering Knowledge Communication: Concept and Implementation

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Abstract: The loss of an employee – voluntarily or involuntarily – represents a great risk of losing information and know how as well as breaks the natural knowledge flow. We developed the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology in order to reduce the "brain drain" through a systematic hand-over. The Knowledge Transfer Meeting consists of five modules that support the retrieval and sharing of knowledge systematically and explicitly. The approach promotes a mentorship or partnership philosophy, motivating the leaving employee to share his or her knowledge and experience with a successor. For the implementation of the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology in the company, we identify and train so-called "facilitators" who lead the participants through the process and hence support and spread the methodology within the company.

Key Words: Knowledge Management, Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Tools
Categories: A.1, H.0, H.4.m

1 Introduction

Even though there exists a vast amount of conceptual literature on Knowledge Management [cf. the overview in Dierkes et al. (2001)], the deduction of specific hypotheses and their empirical proof still is scarce. Hence, there are a couple of practical reasons, e.g. lacking budget or lacking need for a „scientific approach“, we also believe that there exist major university-related reasons: On one hand academia was not able to point out to managers, that there are crucial differences between knowledge sharing and data diffusion via IT systems. This seems to be a major obstacle, since knowledge sharing is one of the core processes of knowledge management and very difficult to manage, as well [Probst et al. (1997), p. 222]. On the other hand managers' needs are strongly focused on implementation, the skill and experience that lots of academics lack.

At the competence center knowledge communication, located at the Institute for Media and Communications Management (University of St. Gallen, Switzerland), we have started to focus on *knowledge communication* in 2001. The aim is to overcome the existing weaknesses of knowledge management practice and research with regard to knowledge communication, like knowledge sharing resp. transfer. Since knowledge communication has three major goals: (1) diffusion of knowledge within the company, (2) prevention of knowledge through building redundancies, and (3) creation of new knowledge by exchanging existing knowledge – our aim is to further develop theory building and practical expertise of knowledge communication processes on the basis of action research.

In the subsequent sections we want to provide information about the conceptual framework of knowledge communication and its implementation. In reference to the transdisciplinary framework of [Gibbons et al. (1994)] we want to make clear beforehand, that this conceptual framework is heavily triggered by practical and not by academic needs.

2 Theoretical background

From a *theoretical* point of view it has been argued, that an organization's capability of sharing knowledge, strongly depends on *structural aspects* (e.g. organizational hierarchies, functional differentiation and separation, workflow, space management) and especially on the *communication structure* (e.g. channels, horizontal and vertical communication, dominant communication styles, structural and personal barriers, reciprocal knowledge flows). One of the most important factors for the unrestricted flow of knowledge in organizations *are social-psychological aspects*. Knowledge diffusion not only requires the spatial distribution of knowledge but also the readiness to share and to pick up knowledge. This disposition depends highly on a climate of mutual trust and sharing culture. Therefore, all tools to distribute knowledge are useless as long as the culture and the incentive systems in the organization do not promote the sharing of relevant knowledge [Pawlowsky/Reinhardt (2002)]. From an *epistemological* perspective, it can be shown that the communication of knowledge – that is knowledge communication – should be conceptualized within a constructivistic approach rather than a cognitivist approach [cf. Reddy (1979); von Krogh/Roos (1996); Willke (1998)]. Based on this understanding, we *define* knowledge communication as an intended and interactive construction and exchange of knowledge resp. experiences and skills on a verbal and nonverbal level [Reinhardt et al. (2001)].

Additionally the difference between *explicit* and *tacit* knowledge [Nonaka, Takeuchi (1995)] should be mentioned here. Keeping in mind that "we know more than we are capable to say" [Polanyi (1967)], we want to introduce a modified version of the common "explicit – tacit" - differentiation debate. Figure 1 shows, that we distinguish between three levels of knowledge explicability: The difference between tacit and explicit knowledge is supplement by the level of "*potentially explicable* knowledge". "Potential explicable" means that individuals can be supported by methods, tools, and interventions to retrieve knowledge more systematically and explicitly [Perrig, Wippich, Perrig-Chiello (1993)]. This phenomenon is well known from all-day practice: If a person is interrogated systematically by an interviewer, he or she is able to remember his or her experiences resp. knowledge in a more systematic way and on a deeper level.

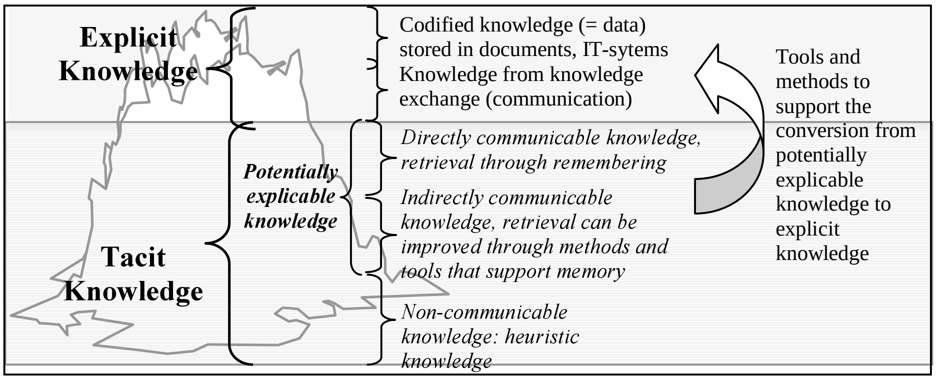

Figure 1: The "Iceberg Model" of explicit and tacit knowledge

From a practical perspective the following generic situations of knowledge communication can be distinguished [Reinhardt et al. (2001a)]; cf. table 1.

	Self	**Others**
Individual	*Individual reflection*: The individual becomes aware of own rules, assumptions, norms values and learns to explicitly apply them to further actions.	*Knowledge Transfer Meeting:* Individuals transfer knowledge to other persons, e.g. in the case of short term absence like vacation, or hand-over in the case of a permanent exit due to promotion or retirement.
Team	*Team debriefing*: The team becomes aware of critical incidents and lessons learned, and learns to explicitly apply experiences to increase future efficiency.	*Team transfer Meetings*: We can distinguish between project related knowledge transfer (similar tasks & processes) and process related knowledge transfer (unsimilar tasks & processes)

Table 1: Knowledge Communication Matrix

Even though this paper deals with the Knowledge Transfer in a one-to-one situation, in the above table we included the team-situations as well as the individual reflection to portray the variety of knowledge communication scenarios. Furthermore, it is evident that the management of knowledge transfer initiatives, that is the fostering of knowledge between individuals or teams resp. an individual and a team is supported by the existence and performance of "self-briefing"-sessions beforehand. Hence, this does not mean that self-debriefing-sessions have to take place before a transfer meeting, but it prepares the individual or team and allows them to identify and reflect critical experiences before discussing resp. forwarding them publicly.

In the subsequent sections we will describe one of our methods – the Knowledge Transfer Meeting (KTM) – in detail.

3 The Knowledge Transfer Meeting

Usually a company has acquired an enormous amount of information, data and knowledge over the years of its existence. It is agreed upon that the *individual employee* is the most important knowledge carrier. He can to a certain extend save, illustrate and retrieve information, data and knowledge that is vital for the company's long-term success, in IT-systems. Time pressure, lacking motivation to share knowledge, and missing specifications of organizational knowledge goals are barriers that restrict the opportunity to reveal, save and store these enormous amount of information, data and knowledge. As defined above, knowledge communication is one way to overcome these barriers through the interactive construction and exchange between individuals.

	Exit Interview	**Knowledge Transfer Meeting**
Goals	• Secure proprietary information and company material • Resolution of unresolved and/ or outstanding concerns of both the employer and the employee, gather input to avoid employee turnover • Employee retention	• Retrieve and save knowledge from leaving employee • Motivate the leaving employee to act as a mentor for his successor
Resp-onsible	Human resource department	Operational department
Participants	• Leaving employee • Contact person from the human resource department • Department head on request (by the leaving employee)	• Leaving employee • Successor • Facilitator if needed
Outcome	• Exit Report, including feedback on the employee's job, department, and the performance resp. deficiencies of the company • Goes into the personnel folder (might be kept separately)	• Hand-over material according to the modules, including any related material resp. links to that material

Table 2: Exit interviews vs. Knowledge Transfer Meeting

The loss of an employee surely is one of the greatest risk of losing information and know how and breaks the natural knowledge flow, either when an employee leaves the company or is absent for a short period. The Knowledge Transfer Meeting Method is an approach to help to reduce the "*brain drain*" (knowledge outflow) through a systematic hand-over process. Some companies have introduced "exit interviews" for employees who retire or drop out to work for another company. Mostly, these interviews are held by employees from human resource management mainly to collect diagnostic information [Giacalone, Knouse, Montagliani (1997)], to a lesser extent to retrieve relevant information such as job specifics. The exit interviews serves as a – maybe the last - opportunity to secure proprietary information and company material, such as passwords from those who are voluntarily or involuntarily quitting their jobs. Moreover, the primary purpose of the exit interview has always been the resolution of outstanding concerns of both the employer and the employee leaving. Hence, exit interviews or questionnaires aim mostly at determining deficiencies in the company – that can be helpful in order to avoid unintentional employee turnover. In some cases, the interview aims at improving the rate of (talented) employee retention [Harris (2000)]. Beyond, the signed report also serves to protect the company from future claims. Obviously, these sensitive documents will go into the personnel folder (they might be kept separately, though) and would not be accessible for other employees as reference. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of an exit interview in comparison with the Knowledge Transfer Meeting.

Thus, the main idea of a Knowledge Transfer Meeting is to provide a structured guideline for the manager and/or the employee to ensure an efficient hand-over [Reinhardt, Stattkus, Prykop (2001b)] with regard to the knowledge preservation in the organization.

Our approach is characterized as follows: (1) We focus on the interaction between two individuals and foster the *partnership or mentorship philosophy* in hand-over situations such as the permanent exit of an employee as well as in daily work such as the introduction to a new role, task or team. (2) We position the responsibility for and the realization of the knowledge transfer in the *operating departments* where the critical knowledge „lives". The human resource department may facilitate and support knowledge transfer but does neither act as recipient nor as a mediator.

The latter issue reflects the re-orientation of the discussed approach. Knowledge management is promoted where the knowledge lives, reducing the loss of information through long ways by taking shortcuts (shortcut meaning the shortest possible way – that is individual to individual instead of i.e. individual – IT – individual), increasing the quality of knowledge at disposal and significantly raising the employees' motivation to participate in knowledge sharing resp. transferring activities.

3.1 Aims Of The Knowledge Transfer Meeting

In order to adequately "transfer" knowledge between individuals, the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Method has five main aims: (1) Visualizing the relevant personal contacts and the business networks that the employee actually uses. (2) Identifying the knowledge requirements to successfully fulfill the responsibilities and the tasks assigned to the employee. (3) Providing a frictionless hand-over of all responsibilities and current tasks to a successor/substitute. (4) Documenting the main success factors and dangers of projects the employee is associated with. (5) Formulating general advice and key learnings from long-term experience.

We distinguish between two basic situations in which Knowledge Transfer Meetings can be applied. Since we follow a modular structure, the Knowledge Transfer Meeting can be adapted to the individual needs and/or the departmental needs in each situation. First there is the common hand-over to a substitute in the case of *short term absence* e.g. vacation. Second we talk about hand-over in the case of a *permanent exit* due to promotion or retirement, for example. Obviously the hand-over in the second situation is much more complex and challenging, but the efficiency of both is vital to the company's success. Commonly, in the first scenario the short-term substitute is familiar with the job and current activities, i.e. an ongoing project, thus a hand-over mainly focuses on current and short-term information, whereas the permanent exit of an employee asks for the retrieval of general knowledge and experience acquired over the years.

The modular flexible approach supports both hand-over situations, furthermore it can be used, as a whole or in parts, to support any similar situations where an effective knowledge transfer is crucial.

3.2 Method Of The Knowledge Transfer Meeting

In the following we call the person who is handing over his job to another employee, the "*communicator*", the person who receives the information is referred to as the "*recipient*".

The goal of the approach is to enable most – in the best case all – employees to communicate resp. receive knowledge in an effective manner by utilizing the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology. To achieve this target, so called "*facilitators*" within the company are identified and trained to support the communicator and the recipient. The facilitator prepares the Knowledge Transfer Meeting and leads the participants through the meeting. In the long term, every employee's experience with regard to knowledge transfer should substitute the involvement of facilitators. Hence, the idea of the approach is to *support and spread the methodology* in the company through facilitators.

The Knowledge Transfer Meeting covers five knowledge domains, one per module. Depending on the complexity of the affected job and timeframe, it might be conducted at once or be split into reasonable sequences which allows for an evaluation of the received information in the meantime. These modules are described briefly in the subsequent sections.

3.2.1 Module 1: Contacts & Relationships

The analysis of interviews held to identify critical knowledge areas and their handling has depicted that in order to properly take over a job from somebody else, it is essential to know about specifics such as main contacts, handling of relevant people and groups (such as clients), relationships between the communicator and main contacts, relationships between the main contacts, and critical incidents („success and war stories"). All information is gathered and documented in the Contacts & Relationships Chart.

3.2.2 Module 2: Tasks & Responsibilities

In order to enable a frictionless hand-over of tasks and responsibilities, the communicator gives an introduction to his job from his perspective. According to the job description, he describes briefly all areas of tasks and responsibilities, and handouts a current action-list if applicable. In detail, this module includes information about resp. hand-over of all areas of tasks and responsibilities, possible risks and chances per area of tasks and responsibilities, and a referral to respectively an introduction to all connected relevant material.

3.2.3 Module 3: Project-related Lessons Learned

In case the short-term substitute or long-term successor is taking over the responsibility for a specific project from his predecessor, the hand-over also must include project-related information. The depth of this information depends on how familiar the recipient is with the specific project. In this module, the communicator summarizes the project history and formulates lessons learned that can be drawn from *past successes and failures*. In detail, this module summarizes the following information regarding a current project: Past project phases/milestones, activities, major successes, major mistakes, and derived lessons learned. This module does not deal with the introduction to the project and the project-specifics, such as special technical features.

3.2.4 Module 4: Human Resource Management

For employees who have managerial responsibility, the Knowledge Transfer Meeting includes the hand-over of information and documentation regarding all employees who will in future directly report to the recipient, including an overview of all subordinates that directly report to the communicator resp. recipient; per person, information about operational area, characteristics, such as major subjects, results from the appraisals, such as goals, soft skills, and information about relationships between the communicator and the subordinates resp. between the subordinates.

3.2.5 Module 5: Key Learnings & Advice

This Module is the last step in the Knowledge Transfer Meeting. In Modules 1-4, part of the experience that the communicator „has in his head“ has been identified and written down. Certainly, the communicator has more experience and lessons learned to pass on to his successor. The formulation and passing on of key learning and advice underlines the mentorship philosophy of the approach.

3.3 Implementation Of The Knowledge Transfer Meeting

3.3.1 The Training Perspective

The Knowledge Transfer Meeting is held by the facilitator. We train dedicated employees to become Knowledge Transfer Meeting facilitators, that is to provide systematic support during hand-over meetings. The group of facilitators should consist of members of all departments. No specific experience is needed. It takes a one day-seminar to provide individuals with the skills of the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology.

3.3.2 Supportive Environment

In order to provide the adequate *organizational environment* to conduct Knowledge Transfer Meetings, the company ensures the following context: (1) Identification of employees to be trained to become facilitators. (2) Receiving commitment resp. acceptance of the superior of each facilitator in order to get the time to participate in the training and later provide support in Knowledge Transfer Meetings. (3) Scheduling / planning of training sessions for facilitators, including organization of infrastructure. (4) Communicating the idea of the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology and the names and availability of the facilitators. (5) Organize infrastructure for Knowledge Transfer Meetings, incl. materials, space, templates for invitation, preparation and follow-up. (6) Nominate a single person or department as contact for any comments, suggestions for improvement, feedback.. (7) Conduction of follow-up meetings for facilitator to share experiences.

3.4 The Train The Trainer-approach

We have introduced the training of employees to become facilitators, being conducted by external staff. Due to the systematic structure of the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology and its self-explanatory nature, we have decided to apply a Train the Trainer-approach for the implementation. The trained multiplicators are capable of supporting Knowledge Transfer Meetings and of training their colleagues in becoming facilitators. The multiplictors replace external training staff. The given approach allows the company to perform and pass on the Knowledge Transfer Meeting Methodology through own employees, which reduces costs as well as reservation and the risk of revealing sensitive data to external people.

In order to provide the adequate *organizational environment* to conduct facilitator trainings, the company ensures the following infrastructure: (1) To become a multiplicator and conduct facilitator trainings, it is necessary to (a) be trained as a facilitator, (b) gain experience as a facilitator in at least one Knowledge Transfer Meeting. (2) Scheduling/planning of facilitator trainings (incl. invitation of participants, organizing infrastructure, e.g. rooms, materials etc.). (3) Every multiplicator should hold two facilitator trainings annually to spread the knowledge in the organization. (4) The company will provide a reflection meeting with all multiplicators and the external team in order to share experiences and to improve future trainings. (5) It is recommended that multiplicators will meet regularly in order to discuss experiences and to share lessons learned. (6)Receiving the commitment of the superior of each multiplicator in order to get the time to conduct the meetings.

4 Conclusion

From a *practical* perspective there are experiences that the Knowledge Transfer Meeting overcomes the shortcomings of common exit interviews, since the operating departments are responsible for the conduction of such meetings. Nevertheless the human resource department still is in the position to play a major role in increasing the success of knowledge transfer. It is evident that an careful succession policy resp. human resource planning is key to knowledge transfer: Considering an “overlapping” time between a predecessor and a successor increases the opportunities for conducting careful hand-overs of crucial knowledge and know-how.

With regard to our *conceptual* framework of knowledge management [cf. Reinhardt (2001); Pawlowsky/Reinhardt (2002)], we can say that the Knowledge Transfer Meeting belongs to an individual learning level, fosters mainly single loop- and partially double loop-learning processes on a cognitive level and triggers diffusion and integration of knowledge.

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