

“Corporate Knowledge Sharing”

Draft v1 of Research Plan for Doctoral Thesis by Matthias Stuermer

Motivation

When should firms share knowledge, and when not, to sustain and improve their competitive advantage? This aspect of knowledge management is one of the important questions many of today's companies are confronted with. Considering the tacit dimension of knowledge (Polanyi 1966) and adopting Grant's knowledge-based view of institutions (1996) the integration of knowledge in organizations is a key factor to innovate and produce new products and thus sustaining competitive advantage.

In the first step, organizations need to learn how to share and transfer knowledge of individuals and groups within institutions (Kogut and Zander 1992) and build up competitive advantage through internal stickiness of the knowledge (Szulanski 1996). However, already on this level, there exist diverse and distributed interests among the actors thus causing problems in the collective action, free riding on other's knowledge just being one example of them (von Krogh 2002). Additionally, caused by limitations of the firm's absorptive capacity, the success of such knowledge integration depends upon prior related knowledge of the organization's members (Cohen and Levinthal 1990).

The challenge of knowledge sharing further increases as it is supposed to take place between different firms, even if such inter-corporate knowledge transfer is often necessary to develop new products (Danneels 2002). Opposing this, there are also scholars arguing competitive advantage can only be sustained by protecting valuable knowledge (Liebeskind 1996). Nevertheless, theory of knowledge sharing across firms pertains concepts supporting the notion of cross-organizational transfer, such as the transformation of explicit and implicit knowledge through externalisation and internalisation (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) or by Rosenkopf and Nerkar's typology of exploration behavior concerning firm boundaries (2001).

One stream of literature particularly concerned with interorganizational knowledge transfer are research publications about strategic alliances (e.g. Simonin 1999). One central issue is the accomplishment of the learning dilemma being a good partner and thus a possible target for exploitation versus behaving in a secretive manner and therefore inhibiting collective knowledge creation (Larsson et al. 1998). Other research attempts to find organizational properties which leverage the absorption of outer knowledge. In their study about external learning, Almeida et al. (2003) look at firm characteristics facilitating sourcing of technological knowledge and find, next to alliances, mobility of experts and informal mechanisms the size of the organization as an important attribute.

Despite previous findings about corporate knowledge sharing the initial research question remains unanswered: When should firms share their knowledge, and under what circumstances is it necessary to protect it in order to sustain and improve competitive advantage? In this gap, the current dissertation project is aimed to bring in answers, towards the main research question as well as to related issues like analyzing benefits and costs of knowledge sharing, the different forms of knowledge and actors involved in the process and the possible traps, either by opening up or by refraining knowledge.

One scientific approach based upon the assumption of freely released knowledge is the concept of open innovation. Arguing with principles like the insight of a firm not having employed all of the smart people and thus being interested in tapping external experts, Chesbrough (2003) points towards a complete reformation on how certain companies today generate ideas and bring them to market. Related to this paradigm is the software industry's trend opening up the development process. A study about the open source software movement engaged in the generation of the Linux kernel was conducted by Lee and Cole (2003) leading them to a new model of knowledge creation. These and other recent investigations about open innovation shall help this dissertation to explore the phenomena of knowledge sharing across corporations.

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