Knowledge Sharing: Why is it Worthwhile? How an Ancient Practice Has Become Fundamental to Invest on Human Capital

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Abstract

The core question of the paper will be: "Why we share knowledge instead of keeping it for us?". In other words, why should people give up their hard-won knowledge, when it is one of their key sources? In some organisations, sharing is natural. In others the old dictum "knowledge is power" reigns. "Because that would not be possible". A simple answer. True indeed. However, when a teacher and his or her pupils are in a class, knowledge is already shared. Therefore, since the ancient times Aristotle, Plato were, in a sense, sharing their knowledge with their fellows…nowadays technologies have magnified the sharing effect of a practice which is as old as the world. Knowledge is shared in space and time in both synchronous and asynchronous dimensions, with results and potentials which are deeply different in their nature and dynamics. In the specific the study of knowledge sharing has its roots within the technology transfer and innovation literature. The research in this area has focused on explanations for different actors' successes or failures in fostering human capital growth through technological development. Starting from this point, the paper aims at focusing on specific angles of knowledge sharing (i.e. strategic management fields, the profitability of sharing knowledge) and the final purpose will be to provide a definition of "knowledge- sharing success".

Knowledge sharing: when a miracle happens

There is something magic about knowledge. It is the only thing that if you share it, you can double it. What a miracle! This is true in principle, however, at a closer look, this unique characteristic of knowledge is not always fulfilled. In order to make this miracle happening certain conditions have to be in place. Tracing back to the down of human history, knowledge was always something treasured and owned by people in restricted circles. Wealth has been a condition for centuries and centuries, gender has been a source of discrimination too, (and at some latitudes these issues are still relevant today).

If you think of literature, an art which has always had the power to describe better than everything ups and downs of human behavior, you can find meaningful examples of knowledge detention meaning real power. "*Il Nome della Rosa*" by Umberto Eco is a case in point. Monks were said not to read a book; if they read it, they would acquire the knowledge they were prohibited to detain; then the punishment came: the death, the end of everything. This is the essence of this global best seller: it deals with something in which each human being has stepped in, at least once in a lifetime, at different levels.

Mutatis mutandis, we can adapt this pattern to our modern days. Knowledge sharing in order to be fruitful and not to become a source of contrast among human beings, should be treated as a precious good, administered through something called "Knowledge Management" (hereafter KM), which has become a real science of contemporary world. There are different levels of KM, and the scope of this paper is to investigate which are the virtuous ones, in order to set the conditions to make this miracle happening. First of all, KM involves the panoply of procedures and techniques used to get the most from one's tacit and codified know-how [1]. The study of knowledge sharing, which is the means by which a human being or an organisation as a whole, obtain access to their own and others' knowledge, has emerged as a key research area from a broad and deep field of study on technology transfer and innovation, and more recently from the field of strategic management. Increasingly, knowledge-sharing research has moved to an organisational learning perspective. Indeed, experience and research suggest that successful knowledge sharing involves extended learning processes, rather than simple communication processes.

The literature identifies five primary contexts that can affect such successful knowledge-sharing implementations: the relationship between the source and the recipient; the form and location of the knowledge; the recipient's learning predisposition; the source's knowledge-sharing capability; the broader environment in which the sharing occurs.

Moreover, a synthesis research suggests three types of knowledge-sharing activities to be evaluated:

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- the analyses of the form and the location of the knowledge are important because each can affect the types of sharing processes that will be necessary as well as how challenging these processes might be.
- the types of agreements, rules of engagement and managerial practices adopted by the different parties are important to evaluate in that they can shape both the flows of resources and knowledge between the parties and the actions taken to overcome and accommodate significant relational differences between the parties.
- the specific knowledge-sharing activities used are important in that they are the means through which the parties seek to facilitate knowledge sharing.

Ownership, commitment, satisfaction

The central question is: "What are Ideas?" A very simple answer: "the critical input in the production of more valuable human and nonhuman capital". One approach to defining knowledge-sharing success focuses on the degree to which the knowledge is re-created in the recipient. Consistent with the innovation literature, but on more micro basis, knowledge can be seen as knowledge packages embedded in different structural elements of an organisation, such as in the people and their skills, the technical tools, and the routines and systems used by the organisation, as well as in the networks formed between and among these elements [2]. From this perspective, knowledge transfer involves the re-creation of a source's knowledge-related elements – its knowledge package – in the recipient. Thus, knowledge-transfer success is defined as the degree to which the underlying knowledge elements have been re-created in the recipient to conform to those of the source. Knowledge internationalizations refers to the degree to which a recipient obtains ownership of, commitment to, and satisfaction with the transferred knowledge, and "personal style" in the knowledge, thereby making it theirs [2].

Commitment is the second aspect of knowledge internationalization. Individuals develop knowledge commitment to the extent that they see the value of the knowledge, develop competence in using the knowledge, maintain a working relationship or interaction with the knowledge, and are willing to put in extra effort to work with the knowledge.

The third aspect of knowledge internationalization is satisfaction. Recipient satisfaction with the knowledge is important because it can reduce the recipient's stress and resistance levels in adapting and using the knowledge as well as reduce the likelihood of the not-invented-here syndrome occurring.

In particular, organizational learning theory posits that learning is enhanced when it takes place in an environment of established rules, goals and norms, and where participants understand and appreciate the other's differences.

Thus, a successful knowledge-sharing effort requires a focus on more than simply the transfer of the specific knowledge. Instead, many of the activities to be undertaken need to focus on structuring and implementing the arrangement in a way that bridges both existing and potential relationship issues, and examining the form and location of the knowledge to ensure its complete transfer. [3]

The "not invented here" syndrome

This kind of syndrome is particularly common and even if it is not entirely negative, it does not belong to the domain of virtuous knowledge sharing. In many cases people have pride in not having to seek advice from others and in wanting to discover new ways for themselves. They do not realise how useful particular knowledge is to others - an individual may have knowledge used in one situation but be unaware that other people at other times and places might face similar situations. Additionally, knowledge derived for one need may be helpful in totally different contexts; or it may be a trigger for innovation - many innovative developments come from making knowledge connections across different disciplines and organisational boundaries. Human beings are at the same time social cooperative beings and have a competitive streak. We all like to do better than our peers and excel in something. Yet, in today's complex world, we need help from them to achieve our aims at best. In so doing, KM is what makes the difference. Knowledge is not simply shared, we should make one step more: knowledge has to undergo a process, it should be "managed" in order to be effectively shared. What is more, for the actual storage and retrieval, there is very little disagreement on the value of IT as a means of sharing, sorting, and accessing explicit knowledge.

Focusing on successful knowledge sharing, this is determined by the following criteria: articulation, awareness, access, guidance and completeness.

- Articulation: the ability of the user to define what he needs.

- Awareness: awareness of the knowledge available. The provider is encouraged to make use of directories, maps, corporate yellow pages, etc.
- Access: access to the knowledge.
- Guidance: knowledge managers are often considered key in the build-up of a knowledge sharing system. They must help define the areas of expertise of the members of the firm, guide their contributions, assist users, and be responsible for the language used in publications and other communication material. This is so as to avoid an information/knowledge overload.
- Completeness: access to both centrally managed and self-published knowledge. [4]

An outlook on knowledge management models

In this paragraph I will examine three KM models that take three very different approaches to KM.
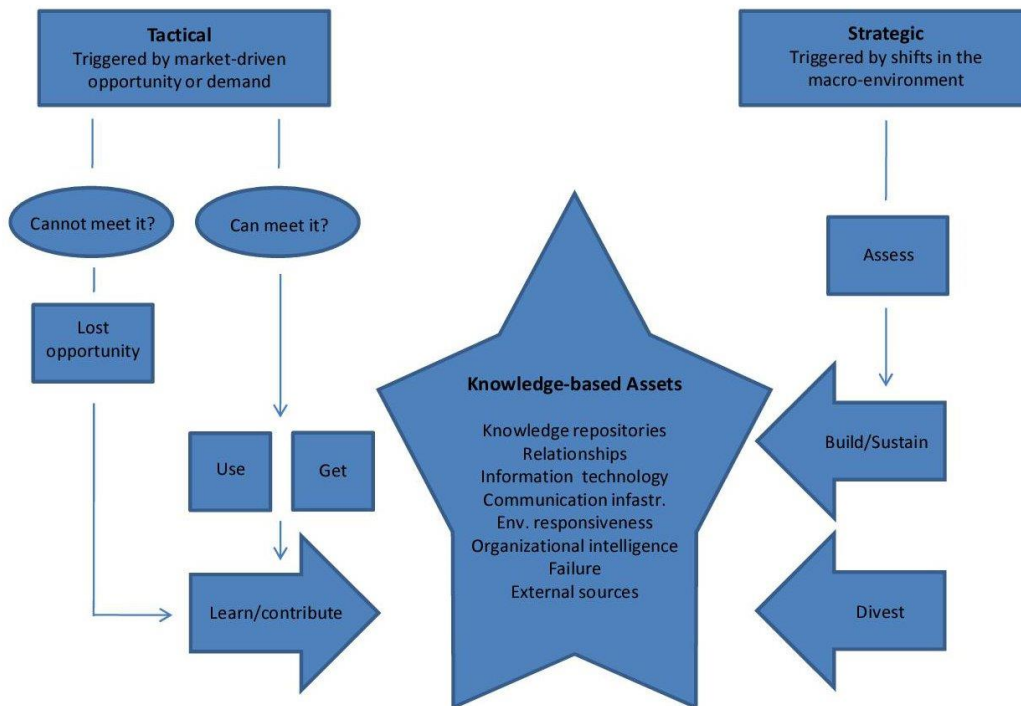


(Fig.1.Table 1. The KM Process Framework by Bukowitz and Williams, 1999)

This KM model depicts the process that defines the strategy for management to build, divest, and enhance knowledge assets. It is a model that emphasizes the "why" and "when" aspects. The strengths of this model rest on its strategic focus, which essentially puts knowledge management action into context. It is also worth noting that the notion of "divestment" is included - something which is often missing from KM models. [5] KM initiatives are the result of the response to tactical and strategic changes and needs. The model provides a great overview of the strategy behind KM but it does not include any deeper insight into what initiatives are suitable in a given instance.

Type \ Approach	Embodied	Represented	Embedded
Sense	Observe	Gather	Hypothesize
Organize	Contextualize	Categorize	Map
Socialize	Share	Disseminate	Simulate
Internalize	Apply, Decide, Act		

(Fig.2.Table 2. The KM Matrix by Gamble and Blackwell, 2001)

This KM model presents a general theoretical framework, as well as specific guidelines for implementation. The KM process is split into four stages. First management must locate the sources of knowledge. Then they must organize this knowledge so as to assess the firm's strengths and weaknesses and determine its relevance and reusability. This is followed by socialization, where various techniques are used to help share and disseminate it to whomever needs it in the organization. Finally, the knowledge is internalized through use. As all sequential models, the steps are not to be taken literally, but they do provide an excellent overview of the role of the KM manager. However, one limitation of this model is its focus. KM's role here is limited to knowledge sharing, omitting the processes of knowledge acquisition/creation and divestment. This is a perfectly legitimate approach to KM where the focus is on the sharing and retrieval of existing knowledge, but it does not fulfill the scope of the knowledge management definition outlined on this site.
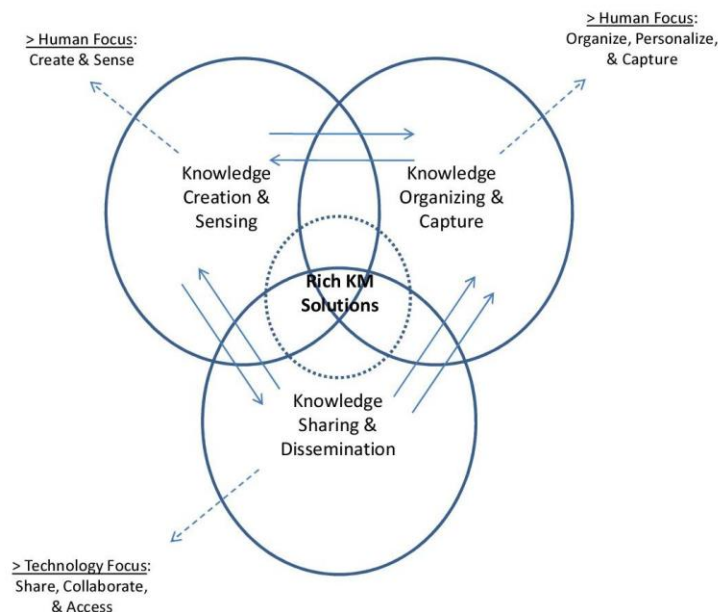
(Fig.3.Table 3. The Knowledge Management Process Model by Botha et al, 2008)

This model attempts to offer a more realistic overview of the KM process. The three broad categories overlap and interact with one another. The focus is on managerial initiatives. Here too the strategic focus (the "when" and the "why" as opposed to the "what") is omitted. It is noteworthy that this model does include the creation of new knowledge as a specific KM initiative. [6] Whether or not knowledge sharing should be largely technology focused is certainly debatable and it is something that I will address in future sections. However, for better or for worse, this is largely how organisations tend to approach the issue i.e. as a technological rather than organisational and social challenge.

Conclusions

Knowledge sharing is a practice which has existed and will exist for ever. It is worthwhile analyzing it, since, in a way, in so doing we are investigating a special sphere of human nature. Every second a bit of knowledge is created everywhere, at different levels: nowadays information and communication technologies have magnified this co-creation. Can we talk of "collective intelligence"? As a consequence of knowledge sharing worldwide, can we create "effective virtual knowledge communities"? These are debatable questions, each of us can have a different insight in these matters. This paper aims at underling how virtuous knowledge sharing does not happen in a casual way, on the contrary it follows precise patterns and models, which will change and be further developed in the future, running in parallel with human knowledge evolution. This is the fascinating part of the "miracle" happening.

References

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