

Tacit Knowledge Transfer Through Global narratives
Giorgio Touburg & Colin I.S.G. Lee
Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam
touburg@rsm.nl / clee@rsm.nl

A central topic in the knowledge management literature is the distinction between codified and tacit knowledge: the former refers to knowledge that is easily transmittable through formal, systematic language and communicated through blueprints, maps, manuals and similar formats, the latter to disembodied know-how, acquired via direct experience and informally learned behavior and procedures (Howells 2000: 53; Polanyi 1966). In today's ever-changing and fast-paced global business environment, knowledge management is considered key in attaining a sustainable competitive advantage (Bartlett & Ghoshal 1993: 41; Grant 1996). And since technological innovations have increased the transferability of codified knowledge, the acquisition and dissemination of tacit knowledge has become particularly important. Multinational organizations have struggled with the transfer of tacit knowledge, supposedly because of the lack of physical (i.e. geographic) proximity between employees. Expatriation programs have long seemed to be the only solution.

The 'classical' view of tacit knowledge transfer centers on the importance of physical proximity in tacit knowledge sharing (cf. Polanyi 1966). More recently it has been shown that besides physical distance, other, non-spatial spheres also facilitate and hamper the transfer of tacit knowledge, such as the relatedness between both actors' occupations, cultures, and organizations (Boschma 2005; Gertler 2003: 86-87; Howells 2000: 59-61; Williams 2006: 600). However, these recent theoretical developments have not yielded much research on tacit knowledge transfer going beyond the analysis of company-level interactions.

In this paper, we analyze the narratives of Indian knowledge workers of Capgemini, a globally operating IT service firm in order to give an impression of the proximities they use for transferring and deploying tacit knowledge. Organizational narratives have proven to be an increasingly important managerial tool; besides communicating trust, emotional involvement and values, these narratives are also believed to be suitable vehicles for tacit knowledge (Sole and Wilson 2002: 3-4). In the description of their work, their education, and their careers, some workers refer to the use of certain non-geographic proximities when they refer to instances where they had to communicate tacit knowledge. At the same time, these narrative descriptions provide inroads for further specification of the narrative through which they will communicate tacit knowledge in the future and also conveys tacit knowledge in itself. This chimes with Habermas' conceptualization of the notion of communicative action, in that it both *transmits* and *renews* cultural knowledge, in an attempt to create mutual understanding (Habermas 1985: 140).

In total, we interviewed 19 Indian employees. One group ('programmers') was expected to rely mostly on codified knowledge and the other ('liaison officers') more on tacit knowledge. In order to operationalize an inherently hard to measure concept like tacit knowledge, we asked them for detailed descriptions of their skills, learning processes and past and current adaptations to new geographies and working environments.

The interviews were fully transcribed. Coding was conducted using Microsoft Access in combination with an extension called *Interview Streamliner*. Findings were further substantiated through Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA), a technique generally used to establish the relatedness between documents (for a technical description of the technique see Deerwester et al. 1990) and never before applied in the analysis of narratives. In our case these documents are the interview transcript, but any type of text can be used, including webpages, scientific publications, or email correspondence.

In this study the technique was applied in a novel manner. We established the relatedness between the participants' narratives on the one hand and several topics that emerged from the interviews on the other hand. The analysis focused on the participant's narrative description of their work, education, and career. The topics include "organization", "profession", "local", "international", "hard skills", and "soft skills". The relatedness between a topic and the participants' narrative indicates the relevance of the topic to the participant.

The specific workings of the technique can be divided in four stages. In the first stage, the co-occurrence of words within the documents is used to determine which groups of words denote dimensions. In the second stage, the frequency with which the documents use words from each of these dimensions is determined to establish the relatedness between the documents and the dimensions. In the final stage, the document-dimensions relatedness is used as a basis to derive the between individual relatedness.

We found that:

- The skillsets both professional groups use and the way in which the members of these groups have obtained these skills differ along the lines of the aforementioned job descriptions;
- The employees in a more "programming" role report on a relatively short work-related adaptation process, while the "liaison officers" tend to need a little more time to familiarize with their new professional surroundings.
- The reliance on geographical proximity through the need for face-to-face interaction is congruent with the dependence on context we mentioned earlier and is seen as a prerequisite for an adequate transfer of tacit knowledge as well.
- In addition, the interviewees report on other, not necessarily geographical spheres in which the adaptation can take place: organizational or cultural. There has to be a certain "proximity" to each of these spheres in order for the transfer to go smoothly. If not, a process of gradual adaptation takes place. The more spheres are altered in the transfer (e.g. a transfer to both a new company and a new geography), the more extensive the adaptation process will be.
- By working for a worldwide operating advanced producer service firm like Capgemini, the "liaison officers" construct and engage in a specifically global narrative, not so much aligned with the organization as it is with their specific craftsmanship and 'global orientation' of their jobs.

References

Bartlett, C.A., & Ghoshal, S. (1993). Beyond the M-Form: Toward a Managerial Theory of the Firm. *Strategic Management Journal*, 14(S2), 23-46.

Boschma, R.A. (2005). Proximity and Innovation: A Critical Assessment. *Regional Studies*, 39(1), 61-74.

Deerwester, S., Dumais, S.T., Furnas, G.W., Landauer, T.K. and Harshman, R. (1990). Indexing by Latent Semantic Analysis. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 41(6), 391-407.

Gertler, M.S. (2003). Tacit Knowledge and the Economic Geography of Context, or the Undefinable Tacitness of Being (There). *Journal of Economic Geography*, 3(1), 75-99.

Grant, R.M. (1996). Toward a Knowledge-Based Theory of the Firm. *Strategic Management Journal*, 17(Special Issue: Knowledge and the Firm), 109-122.

Habermas, J. (1985). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Howells, J.R.L. (2000). Knowledge, Innovation and Location. In J.R. Bryson, P.W. Daniels, N. Henry & J. Pollard (Eds.), *Knowledge, Space, Economy* (pp. 50-62). London: Routledge.

Polanyi, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.

Sole, D. & Wilson, D.G. (2002). *Storytelling in Organizations: The Power and Traps of Using Stories to Share Knowledge in Organizations*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Williams, A.M. (2006). Lost In Translation? International Migration, Learning and Knowledge. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(5), 588-607.