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THE ROLE OF INFORMAL NETWORKS IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING

IN TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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This paper aims to contribute to understanding the role of informal networks in the process of knowledge sharing inside/across transnational organizations.

The focus of the first part of the paper is on the theoretical framework of the study. In the second part theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Transnational organizations may be described as transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000, Kim 2000) and "multicultural spaces" (Maimone 2005, 2010). According to Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby 1964), transnational and multicultural organizations need to develop and "exploit" organizational diversity, in order to cope with a very complex and varied environment (Schauber 2001, Adler 2002).

According to many authors (Holden, 2002, Mudambi, 2002; Phene & Almeida, 2008) knowledge is supposed to be a critical resource for transnational organizations.

According to Nonaka (in Nonaka, Von Krogh and Voelpel, 2006), Lave & Wenger (1991) and Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow (2002) knowledge is socially reproduced and shared. Moreover many authors argue that social capital could leverage knowledge sharing within and across organizations (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), among others, suggest that social capital could enhance knowledge combination and exchanging processes among individuals, facilitating the development of intellectual capital. Furthermore, some authors (Awazu 2004, Teigland 2003) shed light on the role of informal networks in knowledge sharing. Informal networks can be described as networks of individuals that are connected on the basis of their social or personal relationships, rather than of work or task related ones (Awazu,2004). Some authors have defined these networks as *emergent networks* to distinguish them from the formal networks (Monge and Contractor, 1997). Informal networks could emerge within or between firms.

Some field studies (Ailon and Kunda 2009, Maimone 2007) show the significant role of transnational networks as a semi-formal and personal channel for knowledge sharing. People can use transnational networks to communicate and interact with their colleagues across and beyond their organization, seeking for data and information, finding helpful answer to their work problems. On the other hand, according to the outcomes of some field researches (Maimone 2005), employees and managers working in a multicultural space can build personal ties with coworkers that share the same nationality and/or belong to "close" national groups (Maimone 2005, Maimone 2010).

Therefore, we argue that cultural diversity is a key factor to better understanding knowledge sharing processes in transnational networks (Holden, 2002, Maimone & Sinclair 2010-forthcoming). According to several field research (Ailon and Kunda 2009, Maimone 2005, Maimone 2007) transnational informal networks can facilitate knowledge sharing across and beyond the boundaries of transnational firms. Nevertheless, some authors affirm that cultural diversity could also become an obstacle for the creation and transfer of knowledge among individuals (Bhagat, Kedia et al., 2002).

We argue that a "cultural intelligent" approach is necessary to foster knowledge sharing in transnational and multicultural social spaces and propose a dynamic model for the "cultivation" of transnational informal networks.

Transnational and multicultural spaces

The globalization of economy is re-designing the boundaries of traditional organizations, together with the diffusion of new technologies. The development of Web 2.0 tools (Di Bari 2008), the arise of so called wikinomics (Tapscott and Williams 2006) and the ascent of Enterprise 2.0 (McAfee 2006) are fostering the change of business models and organizational forms. The traditional castle of *fordist* organization (Butera 2000) has been replaced by transnational organizations, composed of quasi-virtual teams and semi-autonomous operation units, that represents the cells of a flexible and adaptive network (Castells 2000).

Transnational organizations may be described as transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000, Kim 2000) and "multicultural spaces" (Maimone 2005, 2010). Transnational social space is characterized by the emergence of cross-borders flows of goods, money and activities, transnational procedures and workforce, intercultural practices embedded in an pluri-cultural organizational setting (Ib.). Multicultural spaces are special type of organizational space (Wai-chung Yeung 2005) characterized by a multicultural workforce and a specific set of experiences, emotions, intercultural and trans-cultural practices, processes of cultural hybridization and intercultural climate (Holden 2002). Multicultural spaces can represent also privileged interfaces for knowledge transfer (Ib.).

Knowledge spaces, knowledge sharing and multicultural capital

According to Blackler (1995) learning is supposed to be an active process, so far knowledge cannot be conceived as something abstract, formal and unpersonal. For this reason, the author (Ib.) suggests that "…rather than thinking of knowledge, with is connotations of abstraction, progress, permanency and mentalism, it is more helpful to talk about the process of knowing". Nonaka (in Nonaka, Von Krogh and Voelpel, 2006), Lave & Wenger (1991) and Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow (2002) affirmed that knowledge is socially reproduced and shared.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) developed the SECI model, to shed light to the process of knowledge creation inside organizations. The SECI Model (Ib.) describes a dynamic process, strictly associated to individual interactions.

To underline the socio- relational nature of knowledge creation Nonaka and Konno introduced the concept of Ba (Ib.). "Ba is a shared space for emerging relationships. It can be a physical, virtual or mental space, but all three have knowledge embedded in ba in common, where it is acquired through individual experiences, or reflections on others' experience."

Nonaka and his colleagues (2006) suggested that the process of knowledge creation and sharing occurs within and across different types of ba. We assume that ba is not an "empty space," but an organizational space, characterized by a specific set of values, culture, experiences, emotions, climate, practices, behaviors, relationships (Maimone, 2007, Maimone & Sinclair, 2010). A "knowledge spaces" may nurture or inhibit the organizational processes of knowledge creating and sharing (Bock et al., 2005; Quigley et al., 2007; Wilkesmann & Wilkesmann, 2006), which are intrinsically linked to organizational innovation. We assume that there is also a "multicultural ba", a multicultural knowledge space that may be described as an emergent attribute of transnational organizations, where new knowledge is created and shared.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991) and Nicolini and Gherardi (2002) the process of knowing is situated in a cultural and historical context. These authors suggest that social interaction is a critical component of situated learning. According to this approach, learning is not only a mental process, separated from everyday activities, but it is strictly related to what individuals do.

Therefore knowing is a process of social participation. Participation in different groups/communities and involvement in social practices make possible individuals share their personal knowledge, generate common meaning and identity, find solutions to shared work problem.

Many authors (Holden, 2002, Mudambi, 2002; Phene & Almeida, 2008) argued that knowledge is a critical resource for the performance of transnational organizations. According to Holden (2002), culture can be considered also knowledge. The ability to communicate, negotiate, collaborate and exchange tacit and explicit knowledge in transnational organizations can be defined as an individual and collective set of intercultural and cross-cultural competences (Ib.).

Holden (2002) assumed that the process of knowledge transfer can be assimilated to a process of "translation", e.g. an intra-inter organizational negotiation process that permits the cross-dissemination of knowledge among different national cultural groups. This process is enhanced by the "participative competence" (Ib. page 273), e.g. –"the ability to interact on equal terms in multicultural environments in such a way that knowledge is shared and that the learning experience is professionally enhancing"- (Ib.).

A diversity culture oriented toward the valorization of differences and the development of intercultural communication/management may facilitate the "translation" of knowledge (Ib.) in multicultural spaces. Therefore we argue that the creation of a "third culture" (Casmir 1999), e.g. a bridge or interface culture, together with the development of intercultural competences, may facilitate knowledge sharing as well. Interface cultures and intercultural competences may be considered as a part of multicultural capital (Maimone 2005). Multicultural capital may be defined as the set of collective values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, symbols, rituals, practices, competences and artifacts that can be considered critical for the surviving and performance of a multicultural organizations (Ib.).

According to the outcomes of a field research (Maimone 2005), "real" multicultural environments can be considered the real fabric of intercultural pro-active competences and practices. People working in multicultural spaces experiment every day intercultural dynamics and learn how to communicate, collaborate, negotiate, share meanings and knowledge with co-workers of different nationalities. Organizations may foster this process (Ib.):

   a) explicitly adopting the value of diversity as a core organizational driver;

b) recruiting new workers with international experiences and professional backgrounds;

c) using multicultural teams;

d) incentivizing international mobility;

e) facilitating and developing inter-cultural networks;

f) facilitating and developing intercultural (internal) communication;

g) facilitating an intercultural positive climate.

The role of social capital

Several authors argued that social capital could leverage knowledge sharing within and between organizations (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). According to Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) organizational resources are the result of two main processes: exchange and combination. Particularly referring to knowledge resources, they suggest that social capital could enhance knowledge combination and exchanging processes among individuals, facilitating the development of intellectual capital.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (Ib.) affirmed that the whole three dimensions of social capital (structural dimension, relational dimension and cognitive dimension) contribute to the intellectual capital construction, in different ways:

- The structural dimension influences intellectual capital because social networks allow individuals to transmit and acquire different kinds of knowledge.
- The cognitive dimension (that consists of shared codes, languages, narrations), facilitates knowledge exchanging and combination, because shared languages and vocabularies enable the construction of common mindsets and frameworks; moreover collective narrations, histories and myths facilitate sensemaking processes.
- finally the relational dimension (trust, identity, identification, common norms, ecc..) influences the motivation to share knowledge and information. The outcomes of some field researches showed that strong identification with his own group (Lewicki e Bunker 1996, in Nahapiet e Ghoshal,1998) may facilitate cooperation; on the contrary, differences

could represent a barrier in informaton exchange, knowledge creation and learning processes (Simon & Davis, 1996).

Toward a (inter)cultural intelligent workplace?

According to Thomas *et al. (*2008) cultural intelligence can be considered "A system of interacting knowledge and skills, linked by cultural metacognition, that allows people to adapt to, select and shape the cultural aspects of their environment"; the concept of cultural intelligence, such as emotional intellingence (Goleman, 1995), is based on the assumption that intelligence is multidimensional (Thomas et al. 2008).
Early and Mosakowski (2004) identified three sources of CI, the combination of which improves individual's CI:
-   head or cognitive, referring to the ability to learn about the beliefs, habits, taboos ,values of the foreign culture
-   body or physical, referring to the ability to adapt to the unfamiliar cultural body language and action
-   heart/emotional, or motivational, referring to the motivation and willingness to overcome obstacles and challenges faced adapting to the new culture.

According to Early and Mosakowski (2004), cultural intelligence could be measured by a multidimensional construct (CQ), based on the emotional and social quotient of employees (Workplace Learning Institute, 2007). We assume that the concept of cultural intelligence could be applied at a inter-individual and collective level. We argue that not only people, but also groups and organization could be more "cultural intelligent".

Social networks and cross-cultural knowledge sharing

According to Hansen (1996) and Tsai (2002) informal relations play an important role in firms' knowledge activities, because organizational knowledge is situated, incorporated in individuals and embedded in interpersonal relationships and social practices (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow

2002). Moreover, Awazu (2004) and Teigland (2003) affirmed that informal networks are crucial for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation processes.

Informal networks can be described as personal networks based on social or personal relationships rather than on work or task related connections (Awazu, 2004). Several authors defined these networks *emergent networks* in order to distinguish them from the formal networks (Monge and Contractor, 1997) and suggested that they characterize new organizational forms.

Informal networks may emerge within the firm, but individuals, groups and business unit may also build up a set of informal relationships beyond the formal boundaries of the organizations (Teigland,2003) or of his own local branch.

Hustad and Teigland (2005) underlined the centrality of the concept of "network of practice", that indicates the "informal social networks that facilitate learning and knowledge sharing between individuals conducting practice-related tasks" (Ib. pp 240). So, social networks may facilitate not only knowledge flow but also the process of knowledge combination, the so called knowledge cycle (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

Several researchers affirmed that there is a correlation between the tie strength and the level of knowledge transfer within and across a social network (Uzzi, 1996, 1997, 1999; Hansen, 1999). Hansen (1999) argued that strong ties may promote the transfer of complex knowledge, while weak ties may enhance the transfer of "simple" knowledge. Moreover, the level of social cohesion of the network may influence the quality and the level of knowledge sharing as well (Regans and McEvily): social cohesion may facilitate and foster knowledge transfer within and across informal networks. Several authors adopted the concept of social embeddedness, to describe social networks in terms of "the strength of their social ties, their level of trust, and the extent to which they share common processes and values (Kale et al., 2000; Cohen and Prusak, 2001)"- (Dhanaraj, Lyles, Steensma and Tihanyi 2004). The level of social embeddedness of personal networks is positively correlated to the level of knowledge transfer (Ib).

According to Reagans and Zuckerman (2001), collaboration among people with different external contacts may bridge knowledge gaps, or "structural holes," among teams and networks.

Moreover, Tsai (2001) underlined the role of inter-unit networks: -"By linking different units together, a network arrangement provides a flexible learning structure that replaces old hierarchical structures." (Ib. pp 997).

According to Singh (2005), intra-organizational networks may impact positively or negatively on merger and acquisition processes. So far (Ib.) "the success of alliances and joint ventures as a means for knowledge transfer also depends on fostering close interpersonal ties between employees from the two sides, an argument consistent with findings of Mowery et al. (1996), Rosenkopf and Almeida (2003), and Gomes-Casseres et al. (2005)."-.

Some field researches (Ailon and Kunda 2009) showed the significant role of transnational networks in fostering knowledge sharing. People can use transnational networks to communicate and interact with their colleagues across and beyond their organization, seeking for data and information, finding helpful answer to their work problems. Lyndsay et all (2003, p 11) shed light to the role played by informal relationships in the international services sectors:-"Relationships between various actors in international services are important determinants of knowledge transfer (Windrum and Tomlinson, 1999), competency development and perceived service quality (Eriksson et al., 1999)."-.

Transnational networks may facilitate knowledge translation (Holden 2002) and enhance the construction of the so called third culture (Casmir 1999), or interface culture, that allows communication, collaboration and therefore knowledge sharing among employees working in different countries and/or belonging to different nationalities.

However, according to the outcomes of a field research (Maimone 2005), often employees and managers of a multicultural organization build personal ties with colleagues that share the same nationality and/or belong to "close" national groups. For example an English manager may preferably exchange information and knowledge, share problems and do small talks on confidential issues with colleagues coming from UK, USA, Ireland Australia, etc., etc.. According to interviewees (Ib.), cultural closeness may facilitate communication, trust, reciprocal comprehension and sympathy and therefore it is likely that managers and employees establish intimate and personal relationships with colleagues coming from the same country or sharing the

same language (as mother tongue speakers) and culture. Interpersonal bonds based on national identities may facilitate the emergence of social networks composed of workers of the same nationality or at least belonging to national cultures that are perceived as very closed to each other. This special kind of networks is usually relatively stable and coherent. Therefore identity based social networks may facilitate the sharing of complex knowledge, accordingly with the research findings illustrated above (Hansen 1999). Cultural homogeneity could be an obstacle for cultural hybridization, that represents a critical process for the knowledge cycle, in transnational organizations. Then, mono-cultural networks could become close systems and could represent an obstacle for the intercultural knowledge sharing. So, organizations should pay attention to incentivize and facilitate the exchange and circulation of knowledge out and among mono-cultural networks.

The emergence of national identities based networks may facilitate the creation of barriers for the translation and cross-fertilization of knowledge and the forming of identity based organizational silos. On the other hand, multi-cultural networks may instead facilitate knowledge sharing within (Maimone 2007) and beyond the boundaries of transnational firms. So, we argue that the effectiveness and the performance of knowledge sharing in transnational/multicultural spaces depends also on the structural, cultural and interpersonal dynamics that occur within and between transnational networks.

Conclusions

We assume that transnational social network is a key concept for the understanding of knowledge sharing processes in transnational organizations. Informal personal networks may facilitate the circulation of information and knowledge within and between organizational boundaries, bridging knowledge and competence gaps among teams, business units, different branches of transnational companies. At the same time, social networks may become an obstacle for cross-fertilization and knowledge sharing processes, especially if personal bonds generate close and/or mono-cultural networks.

We argue that a "cultural intelligent" approach is necessary to foster knowledge sharing in transnational and multicultural social spaces and propose a dynamic model for the "cultivation" of transnational informal networks. This model attribute a critical role to the development of intercultural competences and social interactions. People able to build up rich and dense intercultural relationships can play the role of bridge makers among clusters and cultural homogeneous networks. So, we assume the emergence of a core cross-cultural competence, the ability of building and facilitating intercultural informal networks in transnational and multicultural environments. People with a higher level of "Cultural intelligence" and social skills, able to facilitate intercultural networks building, create links among identity-based networks (composed of people belonging to close national cultures) and facilitate the growing of multicultural ties within and between the organizational boundaries can contribute to the development and effectiveness of knowledge sharing in a "cultural intelligent" workplace. Ritter and Gemünden (2003) indicated four organizational preconditions that may have an impact on the development of intercultural network building competences: access to resources, network orientation of human resource management, integration of intra organizational communication, and openness of corporate culture. We assume that the diffusion of a culture of diversity, the leverage of the level of organizational awareness on the importance of multicultural capital, the implementation of internal (intercultural) communication activities (either on line and off line) and the development of ad hoc intercultural training may facilitate the growth of intercultural networking competences.

So we argue that the development of a) a "cultural intelligent" multicultural space b) intercultural network building competences; are critical for the effectiveness of processes of knowledge transfer and translation, within and among transnational networks. The development and diffusion of "intelligent interfaces", such as web 2.0 tools (wikis, blogs, digital social networks, etc.) may facilitate to the development of "real" multicultural networks as well, contributing to the enhancing of intercultural knowledge sharing processes.

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