Knowledge Transfer: A Critical Review of Research Approaches

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Abstract

Knowledge transfer occurs when individuals in the organization share knowledge, skills, recommendations, and ideas pertinent to the organization. Individuals, members of one group, or members of different groups communicate. Direct commitment between the broadcaster and receiver is necessary to ensure that knowledge sharing is successful. Knowledge transfer considers sharing information throughout the organization's divisions and employees. There has been tremendous growth in the amount of study done on knowledge generation and transfer. The latter is caused by knowledge development and transfer, both of which increase an organization's competitiveness. Since the beginning of knowledge management research in the middle of the 1990s, the theoretical development of knowledge transfer has continued to grow. The researcher conducted a critical review of the literature to evaluate the various research approaches utilized by past studies. The paper tries to review and summarize the different approaches which will guide future research studies in knowledge transfer.

Introduction

Knowledge transfer and its theoretical development have been constantly evolving since the 1990s when knowledge management research first took place. At first, knowledge transfer was only referred to as a process of managing the competitive advantage of the organization within the global market (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2016[4]; Davenport & Prusak, 2000[6]; Grant, 1996[11]). It is still considered relevant to the financial performance of the organization, but it has evolved with time and includes knowledge circulation, updating, experience, and maintenance within the organization between the employees who

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are focused on social associations. It helps make sure that the routines and policies of the organization are followed. Through knowledge transfer, people within organizations can enhance their understanding and learning. Knowledge transfer and its increased importance make it essential for organizations to carry out the effective transfer of this knowledge (Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2016[4]).

Knowledge transfer attains significant importance, which has grown throughout the competitors, suppliers, trading partners, and members of the organization. By recognizing its importance, organizations can attain a strategic advantage within the global arena (Son et al., 2020[23]). To make sure an organization is effective throughout the global competition, knowledge should be transferred quickly . Knowledge transfer holds importance both inside (Yeşil, Koska, & Büyükbeşe, 2013[27]) and outside the organization (Zamfir, 2020[28]). The importance of knowledge transfer importance is based on the ability to enhance the organization's fortunes (Argote & Ingram, 2000[3]; Grant, 1996[11]). This knowledge transfer includes knowledge movement from one person to another and integrates two parties with a destination and source (Weiwei et al., 2020[26]). Even though knowledge may be present in an organization, many members may not be able to access it (Davenport & Prusak, 2000[6]): specifically, members who are new or have limited expertise in managing their tasks. Hence, knowledge transfer is important to attain the desired knowledge.

Literature Review

Several studies have been undertaken on the transfer of knowledge within organizations and at the inter-organizational level. Castaneda and Cuellar (2020)[5] specified that Nonaka's spiral model of knowledge conversion (1994[22]), enablers and constraints of intra-firm knowledge transfer, and the communication accommodation potential of diverse strategies enable successful knowledge transfer. The automation of knowledge (use of knowledge management systems) and the humanistic side of the process (interpersonal communication and communities of practice) are the two key topics surrounding the literature on knowledge transfer, according to Susanty et al. (2012)[24].

Psychological Approach to Knowledge Transfer

An organization can transmit knowledge in various ways, such as through vocational training, paperwork, mentoring, strategic partnership, and distributors. The transfer model depicted in Figure 1 lists additional techniques an organization might use to distribute information among its workforce and other relevant individuals (Draghici & Petcu, 2011[7]).

The knowledge transfer model displays some of how information is shared among the members of any organization. The people in the organization who play a significant role in determining the amount of knowledge conveyed and the extent of their involvement in the entire process constitute the source imparting the knowledge and the receiver of the knowledge. They are visible on opposite sides of the model. It is vital to know that the context of the knowledge being exchanged, as well as the surrounding environment, have a significant impact on the knowledge transfer strategy used in any given situation, and that successful knowledge transmission is highly dependent on the motivational temperament of both the source and the beneficiary of knowledge. This is highlighted by the fact that the usefulness of the knowledge and the receiver's capability to internalize the knowledge are both important components in the successful transfer of knowledge.
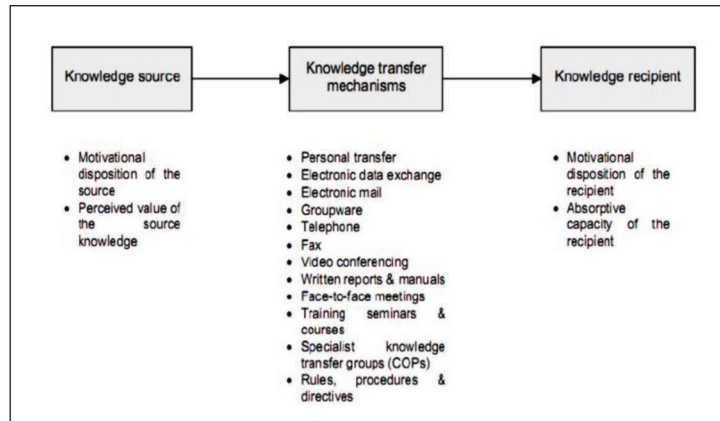
Figure 1. Knowledge transfer model Source: Draghici and Petcu (2011[7], p. 6).

This model does, however, contain significant faults. Although it properly covers the three primary components necessary for knowledge transfer, it neglects to mention the context in which knowledge is exchanged, such as corporate culture, experience, or the competence of the source. Similarly, while the model recognizes the roles of a source and a receiver in the information transfer process, it portrays knowledge transfer as a one-way process from a source to a receiver. It fails to recognize the full dynamics of the process. Knowledge transfer is more than a one-way process when you consider how it can occur between multiple persons at the same time and how beneficiaries can also act as sources, such as during social processes like gatherings and communities of practice. Returning to the first criticism, this model fails to account for the role that an organizational member's perspective plays in shaping their participation in the knowledge transfer process by neglecting to recognize the procedure's context.

Sociological Approach of Knowledge Transfer

The process of knowledge transfer can be interpreted in a variety of ways. While Jasimuddin et al. (2019)[18] believe it occurs mostly among individuals, Argote and Ingram (2000)[3] argue that it also affects groups, units, and organizations. To be precise, Jasimuddin et al. define the transfer of knowledge as a "process by which another obtains knowledge of one actor" (2019[18], pp. 85). Argote and Ingram, on the other hand, argue that it is a "the process through which an individual or an organizational unit (group, department, and division) is influenced by the 'experience' of another individual or unit which becomes apparent by changes that are produced in the knowledge base or results of the individual or recipient unit" (2000, pp. 151).

According to Jasimuddin et al. (2019)[18], knowledge transfer is the total transmission of knowledge from one individual to another. This implies a negative connotation, since the term "transfer" conjures up images of a physical object being transferred, and it falls short of expressing both the meaning of the phrase and the characteristics of knowledge. Comparing knowledge to an object in any way (as some do) renders it a mere mental entity. This indicates that information may not be extracted from a person unless that person consciously chooses to let it go by engaging in a process of deliberate unlearning. However,

knowledge transmission is a process rather than a physical transmission of an object (Sveiby, 2001[25]). Davenport and Prusak (2000)[6] define knowledge as existing in the mind. They assert that knowledge transmission from a source to a recipient in no way means the loss of knowledge for the person who is the source. Rather, this is a process of growth, whereby knowledge proliferates as the number of people with access to it grows.

Knowledge transfer enables the development of activities and procedures by sharing experiences, and research into this process analyses elements such as the creation of knowledge through common instances of interaction and an atmosphere fostering such affinities.

Argote and Ingram (2000)[3] were the first few researchers who conducted research on information transmission at the unit level, i.e., between groups, departments, and divisions. Although they recognized individual knowledge transmission, they believed that information exchange within organizations was far larger than information exchange at an individual level and was predominantly focused on the group or department. They further encouraged departments, teams, and geographical divisions to educate each other. The purpose was to be able to assess the performance of others and establish the impact of the transfer of knowledge in overall department productivity. The emphasis was on learning from other units' lessons and knowledge transfer was measured by comparing the improvement in the unit's performance, which implied that knowledge transfer was effective, or a unit had benefited from the experiences of other groups. This, however, ignores the fact that a unit's functioning is not dependent on information transfer alone. People's engagement and role in knowledge transfer become critical in addressing the discrepancy: resulting in a shift in focus of knowledge transfer research from a psychological setting to a social one. Moreover, researchers sought to study the underlying processes of knowledge transfer across social units like teams, other organizations, routines, and technologies (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016).

The goal of research into the phenomena of knowledge transfer is to assess the outcomes of the transferring process, meaning that the transfer of knowledge can be measured. Thus far, the research has included approaches such as analyzing any variations in an individual's or recipient unit's level of knowledge and evaluating the success of the transferring process based on characteristics such as efficiency, efficacy, and economic return (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016). In any event, the major goal of this study grew into a deeper understanding of the role of information transfer in grasping social contexts such as organizations. Researchers such as Alavi and Tiwana (2002)[1] proposed three approaches to study the management of knowledge: social centric (Argote & Ingram, 2000[3]; Davenport & Prusak, 2000[6]), socio-technical (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000[12]), and techno-centric (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). They contended that knowledge transfer is incorrectly associated with organizational units (departments, groups, and divisions) and transpires in three ways: (a) between individuals or groups of persons, (b) among individuals and knowledge bases, and (c) within repositories of knowledge (IT).

Socio-Cultural Approach to Knowledge Transfer

Understanding the process through which culture and organizational practices might improve a company's knowledge management program has become easier thanks to the social aspect of knowledge transfer. To that extent, the value of background information in comprehending the motivation, achievements, and challenges to information transfer has proven invaluable, with the consensus being that knowledge transfer and culture are inextricably intertwined. The comprehension of this association is essential for designing effective knowledge management strategies in organizations. The goal of such approaches is to use knowledge transfer to connect persons who hold the requisite information with less knowledgeable

individuals in the organization. Organizational culture, organizational structure, technology, human resources, and cross-organizational contacts, according to Hsu et al. (2021)[14], are elements that play a major role in the transfer of knowledge. Contrarily, Jankowska et al. (2020)[17] argue that the determining factors are background, training, and turnover of an organization's human resources. Whereas Kanwal et al. (2020)[19] place knowledge transfer accountability on organizational structures and procedures, Hsu et al. (2021)[14] consider it the responsibility of the HR department, and to a lesser extent, organizational members. Consequently, knowledge transfer research has concentrated on group members' organizational behavior and cognitive processes (Hsu et al., 2021[14]). This study, however, emphasizes that the cohesion between the workforce of the organization and other relevant individuals would facilitate knowledge transfer. According to Mahdi, Nassar, and Almsafir (2019)[20], productivity in teamwork and improvement in knowledge transfer is exhibited once organizational members integrate their knowledge.

The people who engage in knowledge transfer and the organization using this process for any tactical gain have an impact on the knowledge transfer process. In fact, the cultural and social context emphasizes establishing an elevated level of knowledge transfer in an organization, and the knowledge exchange that occurs between employees of any organization highlights team spirit, cohesiveness, social capital (Ghobadi, 2015), learning the culture of the organization, and organizational citizenship behavior (Grand et al., 2016[10]). Understanding not just the cultural environment within the organization but also the cultural dimensions in which the said organization functions helps in the understanding of the socio-cultural context involved in this process. This depicts the interactions occurring between employees as well as between employees and their social setting.

Trust and security, according to the social psychological lens theory, are crucial qualities that not only help to put knowledge into context, but also inspire people to learn and gather new information from credible sources. This is demonstrated by the fact that organizations that foster an environment of transparency, collaboration, and belief, as well as an environment where cultural value can be communicated, prosper more than those that promote an instructional culture (Ismail, 2015[16]). Many studies support this finding. Ismail (2015)[16], for example, not only confirms the importance of culture and context, but also shows how a culture of openness and inclusiveness leads to more practitioner-led gains. Kanwal et al. (2020)[19] use the social exchange and expectancy theories to prove that knowledge-based organizations operating based on trust are significantly more efficient in terms of knowledge transfer and knowledge reuse: that is, the actual application and utilization of knowledge within organizations after it has been imparted. Lastly, Mumtaz and Nadeem (2022)[21] emphasize the criticality building trust and verify that an essential middle factor promoting knowledge transfer and the utilization of that knowledge is the longevity of a relationship, like the research of Galati and Bigliardi (2019)[8] and Heeager and Nielsen (2017)[13] concerning the stretch of relationships.

Conclusion

The review of the literature highlighted the numerous approaches to knowledge transfer that have been taken to address the issue of knowledge transfer inside an organization. The lines between these perspectives were frequently blurred. The research, which was initially focused on organizational performance in terms of idea replication, enhancing efficiency, and strategic effects of knowledge transfer between units and organizations, took a sociological turn. This was motivated by prior study on knowledge transfer that failed to focus on individuals. The sociological perspective also gave rise to research into knowledge management systems for fulfilling the knowledge management goals of organizations. The need to focus on human as well as contextual factors resulted in the socio-cultural

approach to knowledge transfer research. Studies based on socio-cultural approach have taken into consideration national and organizational culture in conjunction with knowledge transfer. Thus, future researchers can consider knowledge transfer construct in association with human and environmental factors.

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