INTRODUCTION

There are probably as many variations of knowledge management definitions as there are practitioners and researchers in the discipline. Complete consensus in such a group would be a surprising finding. This is because the two words are loaded with pre-existing meanings that do not always sit comfortably in juxtaposition, so what it means to “manage knowledge” is difficult to ascertain, and hence comes to mean different things to different people.

We do know however, that knowledge exists in the minds of individuals and is generated and shaped through interaction with others. In an organizational setting, knowledge management must, at the very least, be about how knowledge is acquired, constructed, transferred, and otherwise shared with other members of the organization, in a way that seeks to achieve the organization’s objectives. Put another way, knowledge management seeks to harness the power of individuals by supporting them with information technologies and other tools, with the broad aim of enhancing the learning capability of individuals, groups, and in turn, organizations (Ali, Warne, Bopping, Hart, & Pascoe, 2004). Social learning, in this context, is defined as learning occurring in or by a cultural cluster or organizational group or team and includes procedures for transmitting knowledge and practices across different work situations, settings, and time. However, the application of technology must be guided by the needs of the organization and its workers. As Davenport (2005, p.162) states, “While I don’t question the importance of technology in organizations today, it’s only one source of knowledge and learning for knowledge workers.”
BACKGROUND

In this article, we examine both theoretical and practical socio-cultural aspects of knowledge management based on years of research by the authors in a large and diverse organization. The study involved numerous functional settings of the organization and the researchers used qualitative and quantitative methodology to gather data. Elements required to build an organizational culture that supports knowledge management are discussed. Unless otherwise specified, words in double quotes in the text are direct quotes from personnel in research settings.

ENABLERS OF SOCIAL LEARNING

The research team identified seven basic categories that constitute enabling processes and strategies to facilitate social learning: common identity, problem solving, team building, access to information, development of individual expertise, communication, and induction and enculturation (see Figure 1).

- **Common identity**: A common ground/understanding to which many people/groups can subscribe, and requires a shift from seeing oneself as separate to seeing oneself as connected to and part of an organization unit. Based on our research, motivators impacting on common identity are: goal alignment, cultural identity, gendered identity, language, morale, and workplace design (spatial and physical design).
  - Doney et al. (1998) discuss the relationship between goal alignment and group cohesiveness, claiming that the extent of group cohesiveness relies on the extent to which a team’s goals are clear and accepted and also on the degree to which all members adopt team behaviors.
  - The term cultural identity refers to member’s sense of self in relation to the specific “tribe” and “tradition” to which they belong and how this distinctiveness applies in their workplace. Cultural identity is another important motivator for social learning because, like common identity, it impacts on the extent to which staff feel that they are part of the system or alienated from it.
  - Gendered identity relates specifically to one’s sense of self, which is imbued with the social, cultural and historical constructions surrounding femininity and masculinity. Gender identity, because of its relationship with common identity, was also seen to impact on social learning (Agostino, 1998).
  - Language is another important factor fundamental to the overall social learning processes. By reflecting the
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...social and political relationship between various members, language can impact on common identity. Language is also important in terms of creating a shared understanding among workers and their relationship to the wider organization. “Words are bullets. Never, never use imprecise language.” Thus learning the specific work related language is of central importance to broader social learning development, and is an important outcome of the enculturation process.

- Morale has been a significant focus in the overall study because the research team found evidence of low morale being coupled with higher levels of alienation towards senior management. Such alienation has obvious implications for the broader understanding of a common identity and thus for social learning.

- Workplace design and proximity also threatens common identity when staff are not working in the same location. “[Building X] and us. We don’t see them. There is not any spirit that we are belonging to one branch. I have more to do with [a specific area] than anything else and I’ve made some good contacts in there... who I sit around with.”

**Problem solving:** A core activity. It fosters social learning, because each problem represents an opportunity to generate knowledge. Motivators associated with this enabler are: networking, perceptions of the organization, systemic understanding, and time for inquiry and reflection.

- An individual’s personal and social networks are an important means of acquiring, propagating, and sharing knowledge. As Davenport and Prusack (1998) claim, when those who are in a position of “know-how” share their expertise, they contribute to problem solving. Personal networks were seen to function as channels supporting both “information pull” and “information push.” Atkinson and Moffat (2005) state that sharing of information is based on trust developed through social interaction, shared values, and beliefs. A human is a node in such interactions and a link is a bond that people develop which is based on mutual trust. Therefore, a significant component of a person’s information environment consists of the relationships he or she can tap into for various informational needs.

- Individual and shared perceptions of the organization, and how they operate, provide an essential backdrop to problem solving within an organizational context. These perceptions may consist of deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how people understand their organizational world and how they should act within it (Senge, 1992). The importance of these perceptions cannot be stressed enough, because they directly influence the construction of individuals’ knowledge and understandings that they draw upon in their day-to-day-activities.

- Effective problem solving often requires a systemic understanding of organizational and inter-organizational issues. Systemic understanding requires a holistic view of an organization and its inter-relationships, an understanding of the fabric of relationships and the likely effect of interrelated actions (Davenport, 2005; Senge, 1992).
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- Inquiry and reflection together are a powerful means of enhancing social learning and knowledge creation. Inquiries, or questions, are triggered by problems that require solutions or explanation. Reflection allows time for examination, contemplation and, often, resolution of the inquiries. To use a common metaphor, it is perhaps the best means for distinguishing between the forests and the trees of everyday working life.

- **Team building:** Working together and understanding what each member is trying to do. Team building was seen to be essential for effective social learning and problem solving. As team-members got to know each other they become aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, what they could or could not do, their expertise and experience. Motivators associated are: leadership, team-based morale, performance management, public recognition and reward systems, use of humour, and workplace design (Warne, Ali, & Pascoe, et al., 2003).

- In general, the caliber of leadership within the settings studied was to be admired. The leaders and managers were innovative and they motivated and developed their staff, mainly by demonstrating that staff are highly valued and by acknowledging expertise and knowledge regardless of their pay or position. Another team building issue that emerged was that people were appreciative of informal “drop ins” by senior managers inquiring how they were doing. This “roving management” was said to contribute to better cohesion of teams, to promote system thinking, to help to focus on overall goals, and to facilitate communication and feedback.

- “Team spirit” and “team cohesiveness” are both important values within the work culture and work ethic, nonetheless, there was nothing uniform about this in the settings studied. Some teams did not see the significance of their particular tasks to the overall goals of the organization. However, good examples of teamwork and team spirit were also evident. There were instances where teamwork was well integrated into daily work and where people worked collaboratively. Such teams were goal oriented and were not only teams in structure but in spirit and were led by a leader who saw his/her role as serving team members rather than just having the position of a leader (Warne et al., 2003).

- For many employees, the performance cycle is annual and the outcome of a performance report often determines the prospects of one’s career progression. Some felt somewhat uneasy as their performance evaluation was due relatively early into their posting cycle. A well planned performance appraisal system should help to make equitable and unbiased decisions regarding staff selection, placement, development, and training (Wood, 1989). Researchers were told that there was often a lack of clear communication about performance expectations. Also, an annual performance appraisal appears to be too long to wait for recognition of good work and too late to correct a performance problem. Morgan (1989) and Wood (1989) explain that to maximize positive results, the appraisal process should be two ways, it should facilitate and coach staff in doing their jobs effectively, and it should be frequent and informal.

- It was observed that humor was used for smoothing discussions that were
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becoming heated and to stop the conflict from escalating whilst also enabling the conflicting subordinates to save face. At meetings, humor was used to assist in uniting people around common themes and to make criticism palatable.

One way of and increasing team and individual morale is to publicly acknowledge outstanding work. Making employees feel appreciated, and saying, “Thank you, we know that you are a good employee, we value you and your work,” is a big factor in motivation (Mitchell, 2000). Key informants stated that public recognition of good work was scarce and that a written or verbal word of praise, a pat on the back often means more, for example, than a pay raise—“praise is better than money” and praise is needed at all levels.

Workplace design was seen to have impact on social learning. Staff located at small isolated outposts were at risk of feeling isolated and did not identify strongly with the parent organization. As stated earlier, outposted staff identified more with the workplace with which they were based than their Branch where they affiliated. This was further exacerbated by the fact that they often felt excluded by their colleagues.

- **Access to information**: The easy availability of corporate information in whatever format was observed to effect knowledge acquisition and generation of new knowledge and social learning. Motivators associated are: record keeping, networking, meetings, and information technology (IT) infrastructure.

  - The researchers observed that general familiarity with records keeping procedures was quite poor. Some people have developed their own personal records keeping systems but there was little uniformity in these and no adherence to file naming conventions and standards. As some informants stated: “I believe that physical files in the … are no longer managed well because their management has been farmed out to outside bodies.” or “I think we have problems with passing on information in the organization as a whole. We just don’t do it very well.” The issue of electronic records, particularly e-mail messages containing evidence of business transactions, posed problems not only in the setting studied but also in the ADO at large.

- Personal networks from previous postings as well as newly acquired contacts in the new environment play a vital role in knowledge construction and acquisition. New knowledge often begins with the individual and through conversations people discover what they know, what others know and in the process of sharing, new knowledge is created. Knowledge sharing depends on the quality of conversations, formal or informal, that people have. Sharing of information has a behavioural component and the emphasis is usually on one-to-one networking initiative and effort. It requires time and space (physical, cognitive and social) to develop the sense of safety and trust that is needed for information sharing. Webber (1993) aptly describes it “conversations—not rank, title, or the trappings of power—determine who is literally and figuratively ‘in the loop’ and who is not.”

- Meetings are another means of accessing information and those that
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were observed varied significantly in format and the protocols in place. At the tactical headquarters, meetings that were mission related provided excellent opportunities for learning. Strict protocols were observed at these briefings (e.g., allowing participants to discuss errors or problems encountered during missions without assigning blame or shame to individuals). There were few equivalent meetings at the strategic headquarters, other than some induction sessions and briefings and it appeared that learning how to do one’s job was not given quite the same priority.

The researchers observed that information access due to failings in the IT infrastructure inhibited access to information within the strategic settings. Another issue that caused problems was the difficulty in finding information on the shared drive. Since there was no specific person responsible for maintaining the shared drive and for naming folders, it was left to the discretion of the document originator where information would be stored.

- **Development of individual expertise**: The acquisition and development of expertise was seen as an integral part of social learning. Motivators associated with this enabler are: career trajectories, professional currency, professional training, postings and promotion, and mentoring.

  A career trajectory describes the positions, roles, and experience that individuals have accumulated, up to and including the position they currently hold. While not excluding personal experiences outside of a work or training context, a well designed career trajectory generally equips an individual with the skills, experience, maturity, and personal networks needed to successfully fill a particular posting.

  - The term professional currency has a somewhat different meaning within different environments. However, professional currency promotes social learning in the same way that appropriate career trajectories do so—by providing a foundation for the generation of new knowledge.

  - Appropriate professional training is a significant component of the development of individual expertise and, therefore, a fundamental for generating new knowledge. Training courses are important to furthering individuals’ expertise, as well as for forming the personal networks that subsequently develop. However, in times of budgetary constraints, training money is often the first to go, with damaging consequences for the organization’s ability to learn and manage their knowledge.

  - Mentoring is regarded as an effective method of assisting the development of individual expertise, especially for junior staff a degree of informal mentoring was seen to be built into elements of the training program in some of the settings studied. In terms of developing a career trajectory, the knowledge acquired through mentoring may also be important when individuals want to prepare themselves for specific roles in the future.

- **Communication**: Essential to effective learning within an organization and to effective social learning. Motivators associated with this enabler are: overall communication climate, formal and informal information flows, time for inquiry and reflection, use of humor, language, and workplace design.
Supportive communication climates are being positively linked to open and free exchange of information and constructive conflict management. Characteristics of a supportive communication climate include a culture of sharing knowledge, treating each other with respect, and generally behaving in a cooperative manner. Research has established the link between supportive organizational communication climates and generative learning (Bokeno, 2000; Ruppel, 2000) and with higher levels of organizational commitment (Guzley, 1992).

An important element of generative learning is for organizational members to be able to engage in dialogue, which is open and is based on inquiry and reflection. A supportive communication climate is a prerequisite for such dialogue and it requires learning how to recognize defensive patterns of interaction that undermine learning (Senge, 1992).

The issue of workplace design and its impact on teams, network building, and on accessing information arose repeatedly during the study. Physical location and proximity to each other had the potential to promote the transfer of pertinent knowledge. The point was made that in addition to more quickly obtaining answers to questions about particular tasks, an open plan workplace enabled one to tap into pertinent knowledge by overhearing others’ conversations. Hutchins (1996) uses the term “horizon of observation” to describe the area of the task environment, which can be seen, and is therefore available as a context for learning by team members.

**Induction and enculturation:** Facilitates social learning by providing a foundation upon which an individual can become fully productive. Issues associated with this enabler are: timeliness and comprehensiveness of the process, buddy/mentoring system, handovers and information packages, and training.

Good induction is more than just an introduction to new job and workmates; it is a way of helping people find their feet. Attitudes and expectations are shaped during the early days of new employment and work satisfaction is linked to well timed and conducted
work orientation (Dunford, 1992; George & Cole, 1992). The interviews clearly indicated a relationship between meaningful and timely induction and subsequent job satisfaction. An interesting finding was that those who were not properly inducted or enculturated into the organization saw no need and responsibility to actually prepare any form of handover for anyone who may take over their position in the future.

Although highly desirable, it was not always feasible to conduct an induction program at the beginning of a new posting cycle. In the interim, a “buddy” or “mentoring” system could fill in the gap. A “buddy” would be an experienced workmate who could be available to answer questions and assist the orientation of new members during the initial few weeks. Some interviewees said that having a buddy when they started was invaluable to settling into a new job and to effective learning.

The researchers were repeatedly told that early training is an important part of effective induction and enculturation. It is an opportunity to learn the explicit knowledge that is taught as part of formal training. It is also an opportunity to be exposed to the attitude and cultural perceptions of colleagues and peers.

These factors enabling social learning identified from our data are by no means exhaustive, however, based on the available data the research team could see a relationship between these enablers and social and generative learning. Figure 2 depicts these relationships and their impact on social learning.

**FUTURE TRENDS**

Whether by design or necessity, humans tend to collaborate to achieve set goals. In fact, this sharing of information and knowledge, and the willingness to cooperate, are key elements for learning, innovation, and advancement in general. The progress and proliferation of information technology greatly facilitate this process. However, this widespread application of information technology and emphasis on sophisticated networks for information sharing and social learning leads to a false assumption that once all networks are in place the information will be shared and freely disseminated. The subtle difference between “the network” and “to network” is the key. “The network” is a noun, the information technology, and can only be the enabler. “To network” is the verb, the human behaviour, the action, and the main focus. Therefore, the future trends in the area of social and organisational learning must look beyond the acquisition of technical enablers to individual and organizational behaviour (e.g., organizational structure, processes, and tactics) in order to shift emphasis from a technology-centric approach to a people-centric capability, ensuring that people will get the systems they need and want.

**CONCLUSION**

Organizations seeking to improve information sharing and knowledge generation need to develop a greater awareness of the processes and strategies of organizational learning. Organizational knowledge is distributed across functional groups and its generation and continual existence is dependent on the overall communication climate which is embedded in the organizational culture. This study indicates that information sharing and subsequent knowledge generation would be successful when interactive environments are cultivated before other (e.g., technology-based
solutions are implemented). Therefore, the communication strategy in any organization must take into account the role played by informal and personal networks and trust in information sharing to optimise the process of transferring critical data to facilitate speedier decision-making. Technology should only be designed and applied after a thorough investigation of the work practices and work preferences of the people and teams in the organization.

REFERENCES


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KEY TERMS

**Career Trajectory:** Describes the positions, roles, and experience that individuals have accumulated, up to and including the position they currently hold.

**Common Identity:** A common ground/understanding to which many people/groups can subscribe, and requires a shift from seeing oneself as separate to seeing oneself as connected to and part of an organizational unit.

**Communication Climate:** Extend to which there is an open and free exchange of information, transparency of decision-making, and how constructively conflict is managed.

**Knowledge:** An understanding gained through experience or learning: the sum, or a subset, of what has been perceived and discovered by an individual. Knowledge exists in the minds of individuals and is generated and shaped through interaction with others.

**Knowledge Management:** In an organizational setting, it must, at the very least, be about how knowledge is acquired, constructed, transferred, and otherwise shared with other members of the organization, in a way that seeks to achieve the organization’s objectives.

**Social Learning:** Learning occurring in or by a cultural cluster and includes procedures for transmitting knowledge and practices across different work situations/settings and time.

**Systemic Understanding:** A holistic view of an organization and its inter-relationships, an understanding of the fabric of relationships and the likely effect of interrelated actions.