

Lost in Translation: Why Organizations Should Facilitate Knowledge Transfer

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Abstract (968 words)

In the movie *Lost in Translation* the two main characters, Bob and Charlotte, experience the feeling of being “lost” in a foreign country. Both do not speak the language and they feel detached from the existing world. In this paper, I support the view that when knowledge is transferred in organizations, the same process occurs: a great part of it is “lost in translation”.

Even if knowledge transfer has been extensively studied both in theory and in practice in the last few years, very few analyses have been made in the lenses of rhetoric. With very few exceptions (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000) organizational knowledge transfer - defined as the process through which one unit (eg. group, department or division) is affected by the experience of another (Argote and Ingram, 2000: 151) - has been mainly represented as a communication process. Complementary to this view, I propose to interpret the circulation of knowledge in organizations as a process of translation: knowledge is not only transferred between two entities but transformed during that process.

To support my point, I look at the different theoretical views on knowledge transfer in the organizational context. Four analyses can be found: the cognitive approach, the economic approach, the situated approach and the translation approach. First, knowledge transfer can be seen as a dyadic process between a sender and a receiver. In this cognitive approach, knowledge transfer is seen as a way to change the knowing activity. In the second analysis, knowledge is considered as a commodity built on routines. Transferring knowledge means choosing and re-using the right routines to ensure the evolution of the organization. The situated approach tries to make a synthesis of the both approach by analysing knowledge in the context which it is created, used and transferred. Finally, the translation approach focuses on the modifications of knowledge that take place when it is translated. It involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). Because the process involves geographically and functionally very different communities and social actors, it is one of the most frequent ways in which knowledge crosses organisational and geographical boundaries to move into other areas (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996).

This review of literature shows that organizational knowledge cannot be conceived as a mental process residing in members’ heads, but, rather, as a form of social expertise, in which the learning process is tight with individual’s practice. This social expertise is modified by the participants and often materialized into narratives. To be consistent with my view, I examine a story of knowledge transfer in a multinational company. My research methodology is qualitative and driven by a constructivist epistemology - even though the story studied has not been written by the researcher. Indeed, I identify a story by using primary data (interviews, observation and pictures taken) and secondary data (database, statistics on this database and internal documentation). As detecting the presence of particular stories in particular organizations is not enough in research in social science (Czarniawska, 2004), my intent is to confront the communicated version of the story with the feelings of people engaged in that transfer in order to assess the modifications of knowledge. That is why the interviews were structured into three main parts: the problems encountered by the units before the practice was adopted; the efforts for adapting the practices; and the lessons they have learned after this knowledge integration.

First, I examine the story as it was communicated inside the company. The story is about the re-use of a new device called the “lump-breaker” which improves the manufacture in a gypsum plant. It explains how this solution was subsequently adopted by a factory in the USA after reading the database which contains the best practice. Then, I confront the story to the views of people involving in the translation of this best practice: the sender, the receivers and the “translator”. I discover that the lump-breaker is seen as a small piece of equipment regarded by technical experts as a trick rather than a technical breakthrough. Moreover, the translation process was not successful as it was presented. As stated by one plant director “*the first use of the device was pure luck and nobody really checked that there has been a true transfer. At least, the implementation was fast and the idea was well transferred. However, the know-how was not capitalized and no headway was made towards an efficient Division-wide implementation. The second attempt at transfer turned out to be a failure*”. I discover that when the sender has made little efforts on translating the best practice into simple terms, the receiver has much more difficulties to re-use the device. At this point, the role of the knowledge management team (ie. the “translator”) is to ease the re-use of the knowledge by “packaging” the best practice. If the effort is not done by the sender, the knowledge management team acts as a “translator” for the receiver. It also leads to minimize the role of technological mechanisms (databases and information portals) if the sender does not play his role: the practice has to be described in such a way that others can implement it. If not, the practice is lost.

When you are watching the movie *Lost in Translation*, you have the feeling that what you get out of it depends on how much you put into it. I think that it is the same for knowledge transfer in multinational companies. In organizations, only strong support and a significant effort from a knowledge management team will lead others to adopt a practice. However, very few people understand that their successes are a valuable piece of information for everybody else in the community and that documenting these successes is a powerful way to bring the community forward.

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