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**Knowledge in Theory and Practice**

# Knowledge Management Beyond Borders

## Globalization and Cultural Identity

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# Editorial

## By Steffen Doberstein

Although internationalization and globalization have become key topics over the past years, little attention has been given to these issues in knowledge management literature. However, we think international knowledge management will become more and more a daily task. International teams are a big challenge for knowledge managers. That's why we chose the topic for the current Open Journal edition:

**Knowledge Management Beyond Borders - Globalization and Cultural Identity**

International topic – international language, the articles submitted for this Open Journal were supposed to be written in English to reach a broad international audience. However, we must admit that we did not attract the international knowledge management community's attention as we wished for. A large number of this Open Journal's articles were written by authors whose native tongue is German. Anyway, this Open Journal is published for an international audience. Or is international knowledge management not as specific as we thought? I was surprised finding "old friends" of knowledge management among those who submitted a paper. The described problems are very similar to the problems within a "national" organization. And if authors refer to problems with international aspects, the solution, too, is already well-known. Of course, typical problems do not disappear and why should someone reinvent the wheel, if there is a proper solution? Let us cite two of the authors. Norbert Herrmann: "*As a German in southern Africa, the author implicitly uncovers 'cultural differences' but also uncovers barriers concerning technology, content, processes and routines, some of them interlinked to 'cultural differences'.*" M./Fegerl/W.Wieden: *"Experts from specific domains such as biology or measurement technology did not face serious problems in negotiating knowledge standards within their domain across cultural boundaries, but often had difficulty to make their expertise accessible to experts from other domains (non-experts from their point of view)."*

After all, I think we do not need a new theory for handling knowledge transfer problems between different national cultures, but it is very helpful to have the experiences of practiced people (at best the predecessor). However, form your own opinion and read the chosen papers.

Most of articles are case studies. The authors are practitioners and write about their (subjective) experiences in international projects or international organizations but with profound theoretical knowledge.

Enjoy our Open Journal of (International) Knowledge Management and learn from the experiences of others!

# Barriers in Intercultural Knowledge Sharing. Learning's From an International Plant Engineering Project

## By Ines Kaps

**Abstract**

*Fast reaction to changing customer requirements and the profitable exploitation and management of existing knowledge is becoming a competitive advantage for companies. In order to manage knowledge, employees need to be willing to share their experience first. Cultural differences in terms of the communication style (explicit or implicit communication in low or high context cultures) or perception of risk or power often hinder people in sharing their knowledge. Trust is therefore a key dimension in knowledge sharing. Hence these barriers may hinder people in understanding each other's knowledge and experience.*

*Cultural trainings, adapted processes and meeting styles that meet the different requirements of high- and low-context cultures can improve the outcome of international projects.*

*Systems and processes may support knowledge management initiatives but the key drivers are building trust and commitment and highlighting successes and results of these initiatives (e.g.: a faster development of a customer solution).*

## 1 Introduction

A UK based research company, that is part of an international engineering company (approximately. 400 employees) holds more than 350 patents, whereas its German based mother company (ca. 32 000 employees) holds around 55 000 patents (Kaps-Mladenoff, 2009). The approaches of exploiting this tangible knowledge differ, amongst other factors, due to the different perceptions of risk in setting up companies. Setting up a business in Anglo-Saxon Countries is less bureaucratic than in Alemannic countries (based on the author's experience of setting up businesses in Germany and UK).

A German based plant engineering company struggles to present and unfold the knowledge of an international project team in order to efficiently complete the project. The understanding of the predominantly French and German project team of what was said and meant is different.

These two examples show, that knowledge management is a very broad topic from using the individual's knowledge to perform a task to exploit a tangible patent. Hence knowledge management can be aligned to a specific role within a business, such as a knowledge management department, it can be in the hands of human resources that is responsible for the development of people's capabilities and competences through trainings or it can be linked to IT. Here knowledge management or often more precisely document management is focused on implementing processes and systems for capturing what is written. In some companies, knowledge is managed in innovation and research departments where experience and insights create new technologies, patents for example.

Knowledge can be described as being intangible, fluid, personal, elusive, and invisible and ever evolving (Gorelick, 2005). Consequently knowledge management is a framework that uses systems, processes, people and a culture that manages this intangible asset. Organisational knowledge management focuses on supporting employees so that they can use what they know (Widén-Wulff, 2007) for realising the organisation's objectives.

This framework is embedded not only in a company's culture, where trust and learning are key elements influencing employees' readiness to share their knowledge, learning's and errors. A company culture does not stand on its own, but it is influenced by the culture of the county and by the individual cultures of the employees. Figure 1 shows the interdependence of people, processes and systems embedded within a culture.

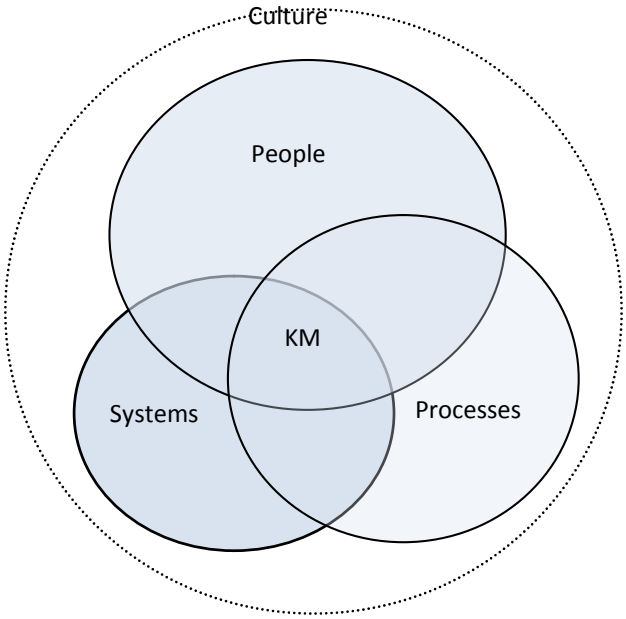


Figure 1: Knowledge Management Framework (Adapted Gorelick, 2005)

The figure also shows, that the major factors in knowledge management are people and processes. IT systems play a minor apart but can support implementing holistic solutions.

Culture has an influence on all three elements. On people, when it comes to the awareness of cultural differences; on processes, when it comes to following processes strictly and on systems when it comes to accepting new technologies. Cultural barriers in knowledge sharing can be seen in these areas.

## 2 Culture and Knowledge Sharing

Among others, Edward T Hall, Geert Hofstede and Alfons Trompenaar have developed concepts to analyse the differences of cultures on international levels. These concepts shortly described in the next part highlight key elements of two cultures: the French and the German culture that are important for an international plant-engineering project.

### 2.1 Concepts of cultural analysis

Hall's (http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/hall_culture.htm) differentiation of high and low context cultures has two specific areas the focus on communication and information: "Overtness of messages" and the "use of non-verbal communication". Table 1 links the factors overtness of messages and use of non-verbal communication to the high- and low-context cultures.

| Factor | High-context culture | Low-context culture |
|---|---|---|
| Overtness of messages | Many covert and implicit messages, with use of metaphor and reading between the lines. | Many overt and explicit messages that are simple and clear. |
| Use of non-verbal communication | Much nonverbal communication | More focus on verbal communication than body language |

Table 1: Hall on High and Low Context Cultures:
http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/hall_culture.htm

These two dimensions have a very direct influence on how people share and communicate their knowledge. High-context cultures may use stories and metaphors in explaining a learning situation whereas low context cultures may uses tables and figures for underlining arguments. Non-verbal communication may require regular physical meetings for developing relationships and exchanging information whereas the focus on verbal communication leads to written emails and phone calls.

*Example*: *An international plant engineering project team has two project directors: a French and a German. These two directors communicate in different ways. The French project director communicates more verbally and between meetings with key stakeholders, whereas the German project director writes status reports supported with detailed task lists and project plans. Depending on the stakeholder's culture these two approaches are perceived as either too vague or too detailed.*

Trompenaar's dimensions on 'Inner-directed vs. Outer-directed' can be linked to Hall's low and high context culture where high context cultures would say that "thinking is the most powerful tool and that considered ideas and intuitive approaches are the best way" (implicit and non verbal communication) (http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/trompenaars_culture.htm) to achieve results. This means also that 'Outer-directed' cultures (low context cultures) are seeking data in the outer world.

Hofstede's power and uncertainty dimensions can also be seen as major influences on communication and information sharing. Cultures with a high power distance factor (e.g.: France 68 of 100 points) prefer centralized and top-down approaches, whereas low power distance companies prefer equality (e.g.: German 35 of 100 points) (http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php?culture1=34&culture2=33). Uncertainty avoidance can be seen in the extent of rules and bureaucracy that a culture establishes to deal with unfamiliar situations. Hofstede also suggests that uncertainty-avoiding cultures express their emotions more openly than uncertainty accepting cultures (e.g.: France: 86; Germany: 65).

*Example: The project organisation in an international plant engineering projects is hierarchical on the French side, where the French project director is involved in detailed decisions, whereas the project structure on the German side is a matrix structure where the project director is involved in high level interest conflicts due to the matrix structure.*

These three approaches of analysis suggest that culture has a major influence on how people deal with communication, information hence knowledge.

### 2.2 Cultural challenges in knowledge sharing

Implicit and vague emotional communication versus explicit and precise information – linking classical cultural stereotypes to these statements one could easily use France versus Germany (Pateau, 1999).

On the one hand one could imagine an eloquent project manager who manages very hierarchical and top-down. Key information and decisions are discussed at business lunches after having developed a solid relationship over a period of time. On the other side a precise engineer who is familiar with organizational matrix structures. Decisions are made in very detail-focused meetings.

The experience of these two employees may be very valuable for the company or a project. They may even depend on each other's knowledge, nevertheless they don't understand each other. Hence 4 areas can be identified as key challenges:

- Communication Style: how explicit and precise is the communication or does one need to understand the context to read between the lines
  *Example: The French project director is interested in understanding the context of a problem and all possible dependences. These talks often take place at the coffee machine or at lunch. The German project director is interested in precise details of the current problem. This information is mainly exchanged in organised meeting.*
- Organisation / Power: how acceptable is knowledge exchange across hierarchies
  *Example: A clear hierarchical structure is important in France whereas a matrix structure is genuinely accepted in Germany.*
- Language: besides cultural topics on communication, misunderstanding and the reluctance to share knowledge can be based on simply not knowing how to express oneself
  *Example: The French language is descriptive whereas the German language is more precise. This can be seen in the different TV advertisements of cars, for example. A French car advertisement is more about emotion (e.g. Peugeot) whereas a German car advertisement is more about technical functions (e.g.: VW).*
- Trust: without a culture of trust within a company and across country cultures no one will share learning's or other valuable stories for continuous improvement processes or simple successful project implementations. Trust is a key basis to overcome uncertainty.
  *Example: the way of building trust is different in the two described cultures. In the plant engineering project trust is developed in personal meetings where the French side is focussing on building a relationship over a long period whereas the German side seeks for reliable expertise and facts.*

A culture of trust enables knowledge sharing and learning. Trust has an effect on greater creativity, commitment, professional satisfaction, and better performance both of individuals and of the organisation (McKenna, 2002). By rewarding behaviour and competences of knowledge sharing and learning organisational change will be supported. Clear communication and the engagement of the management team are essential so that the employees follow the company leaders. Ignoring the cultural aspect will make the implementation of a new knowledge management concept obsolete.

## 3 Conclusion and Suggestions

Successful knowledge management is becoming a critical success for companies. An effective knowledge management is a holistic framework that considers the interconnections between systems, processes, people and culture and is not only concentrated on input factors such as trainings but also on measurable output factors such as the application of new knowledge and innovations. Enabling the change from passive knowledge capturing to active knowledge sharing, both needs a focus in increasing trust within a company

and an attractive bonus and reward system for employees. International and intercultural differences challenge the exchange of knowledge but can be diluted by a strong level of trust.

### 3.1 Implications for the element 'People'

According to Maister (2001), companies increase their financial profitability if their staff is highly motivated and satisfied. These companies use their internal knowledge to improve solutions and react fast to customer requirements. Therefore companies should focus on the people side of knowledge sharing by building relationships and trust via providing regular face-to-face meetings that are an integrated part of the business process.

- Trainings: inter-cultural trainings can increase the awareness of cultural differences. People who know about the different communication styles and power differences can adjust their approach in communication and project management. This would help high-context cultures to express their knowledge and to become more explicit by getting to know the requirements of low-context cultures. These would learn reading between the lines and asking concrete questions to become more explicit answers.
  *Example: For the international plant-engineering project this would mean, that project meetings would include regularly business lunches to build relationships and to have the forum to understand the context and interrelationships. On the other side project reports would be implemented for the whole team but the detailed levels would be reduced. Therefore the requirements for both cultures, French and German can be addressed.*
- Trust: Building trust is a basic element for exchanging knowledge and needs to be developed by rewarding people when sharing knowledge and taking openly about errors they have made and by highlighting success stories when sharing led to fast learning and better results.

Example: regular feedback meetings are used to analyse projects and to highlight mistakes, improvements and successes. These and the above described meetings are key elements to build trust within the team and the company across cultures.

### 3.2 Implications for the element 'Processes'

In an ideal situation processes and systems would enable employees from high and low-context countries to share their knowledge either using little structured forums and meetings for story telling (high context) or detailed forms for describing a situation (low context).

- Regular communication: Success stories that communicate the outcome and benefits of the knowledge sharing will enhance the willingness to be part of the knowledge-sharing champions.
- Lessons Learnt: regular improvement meetings that aim to
  - analyse projects critically in order to search for innovative solutions of current problems,
  - improve products and processes,
  - integrate customer feedback and highlight
  - best practices can support the culture of knowledge exchange and learning.

Rewards and appraisals should also be linked to knowledge sharing objectives so that is it clear for every employee that management takes this topic seriously. Moreover management needs to be a strong role model and show clearly how it is sharing knowledge across cultures (walk-the-talk).

*Example: The international plant engineering company implemented lessons learnt meetings and processes within the sales and project execution process in order to learn directly from current projects. It involves*

*people across functions to get a holistic view on a contract, for example. What implications on purchasing, site management and development has a specific section of the contract?*

### 3.3 Implications for the element 'Systems'

Technical solutions can support knowledge sharing initiatives by developing and implementing knowledge sharing platforms. Of course, these platforms need to be open to give employees the possibility to share and access knowledge they need to perform their role.

- Culture related requirements: Translation processes or integrated dictionaries may diminish languages problems. Ideally the entry point and the search function are customised to the different ways of working with IT systems in high- and low- context cultures. Of course the search result needs to be the same.
- Unstructured communication forums: blogs, wikis and discussion forum will support high-context cultures in express their knowledge in a less detailed-driven way.
- Structured databases: Clearly structured databases and feedback forms will play to low-context cultures in collecting explicitly their knowledge.
- Security Settings: The system may lessen hierarchies and matrixes by less strict internal security setting.

Nevertheless any knowledge management system can only support the change to a knowledge sharing culture but can never be the single source for knowledge management.

*Example: The international plant-engineering company uses the implementation of a new information and document management system to drive the knowledge sharing culture. Here the implementation of the new system is the driving force. By intense change management and communication during the project people can express their requirements and their needs to get information from other departments. By presenting these findings, the employees were able to see, that their requirements of sharing knowledge were similar across functions and cultures. A modular implementation approach (project by project and department by department internationally) enabled the communication of regular success stories. Proven evidence of knowledge sharing successes supported the slow development of a knowledge sharing attitude across cultures.*

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# Knowledge Management in Virtual Communities

## By Dirk Langenberg and Melanie Welker

**Abstract**

*People with common interests meet in communities to exchange their knowledge. Today, these communities are organized virtually in the internet. Geographical as well as cultural borders do not exist anymore – theoretically. In practise, these communities need support for their communication and their knowledge transfer in order to keep the members together. This paper summarizes the main results of a study, which analyses the cultural differences of communities in different regions of the world. Further on it describes possibilities, how software solutions support the collaborative work in transcultural communities and how a future solution might look like.*

## 1 Background

Part of many discussions in the press, in the TV, but also in weblogs or social networks, today´s keyword is “globalization” and its various aspects and influences on economical events and behaviour. Nowadays, there exist visible tendencies in the development of mergers, acquisitions and co-operations of enterprises from different branches. More and more of these mergers and acquisitions operate and take place in an international context. The “global” thinking is lively embedded in smaller, locally concentrated but also in transnational-oriented enterprises. Over the last years, the possibilities to communicate between enterprises, organizations, research institutions and universities have enlarged and intensified. As per Xing founder (a social network to establish business contacts) “everyone knows everyone through maximum six corners. [...] if everyone knows everyone through six corners, the whole implicit and explicit knowledge of the world should be available through maximum six corners at the same time.” (Knoof 2007, 44). Employees or resources as the ones who are strongly involved into this communication seem to be more and more important. Only with global knowledge transfer and intercultural communication across borders and countries, they can face today´s challenges. Therefore, human-beings and resources can be seen as key elements in organizations and their economic success.

In the context of knowledge management a wide variety of different virtual communities in the internet can be found. For example newsgroups, social networks and weblogs just to name some of them. People from different countries and cultures who are interested in exchanging on topics or ideas have the chance to get in contact with each other through these virtual communities. Even though these methods and tools have been developed in the global environment, today´s requirements for knowledge management communities have changed during the last years.

On the one hand, they should support the international cross links (economical, technical and social) between organizations and therefore enable or facilitate knowledge transfer activities within these organizations. On the other hand, they should also try to minimize geographical distance and language barriers between users and overcome intercultural barriers and communication problems within these cultures. Technically speaking, there exist different tools for these requirements in knowledge management communities, one of them will be presented later.

When treating topics like globalization as part of new working conditions, modern communication technologies and resources of organizations in the centre of all that - the impact of intercultural behaviour and cultural differences cannot be excluded. The “cultural distance” (Haghirian 2004, 40), as well as

"different languages (...) and country-specific interpretations" (Reisach 2008, 106) can play a certain role in cyberspace communication, because they might have a strong influence on the communication itself. As part of a study in 2009, altogether 25 knowledge management communities have been analysed regarding more than 11 cultural oriented success indicators. Through this international comparison of knowledge management communities, the classification of cultural areas by Hall and Hofstede could be proved.

The following chapter deepens the classification of cultural areas by Hall and Hofstede by highlighting different cultures, behaviour and relationships (paragraph 2). Different cultures and cultural backgrounds do have an influence on communication in general, but furthermore on communication in virtual surroundings. With respect to these different situations, the authors propose software functionalities which can face these changing requirements (paragraph 3). Finally, this study shows first results of the realisation of a knowledge management and collaboration service (paragraph 4).

## 2 Classification of cultural areas by Hall and Hofstede

To prove, whether cultural differences and country-specific interpretations have an influence on communication, the classification of cultural areas by Hall and Hofstede can be one possibility. The three dimensions help to detect a possible relation between the handling with modern communication technologies in the internet and cultural behaviour of people from different countries.

The first dimension to classify cultures is called Individualism – Collectivism (see table one). This dimension illustrates the impact of the individual or the group within a culture and to what extent they can belong to a social structure. The second dimension Monochronic – Polychronic describes the relation to time and the handling with time (see table two). And the third dimension Low Context – High Context shows behaviour and attitudes towards information gathering and the usage of communication tools and how different cultures use modern technologies (see table three).

| **Individualism** | **Collectivism** |
|---|---|
| Autonomy, Identity from the individual | Integration into networks, social environment gives identity |
| Loose connection between people, personal responsibility | Integration into strong, bonding groups, protection |
| Direct, open, honest, sincere | Indirect, not linear, prefer harmony |
| **e.g. USA and Europe** | **e.g. Spain, Latin America, Asia** |

Table 1: Individualism – Collectivism (according to Hofstede)

| **Monochronic** | **Polychronic** |
|---|---|
| Time is linear | Time is not linear |
| Exact planning, interruptions should be avoided | Improvisation, interruptions are normal |
| Several actions are executed one after another | Several actions can be executed in parallel |
| Analytical, systematically, punctual | Intuitive, unpunctual |
| **e.g. USA, Northern Europe, Germany** | **e.g. Spain, France, Italy, Asia** |

Table 2: Monocronic – Polycronic (according to Hall)

| Low Context | High Context |
|---|---|
| Communication is explicit | Communication more implicit, much information to be found in the context |
| Direct, clear way of communication | Indirect, ambiguous way of communication |
| Specific need in information | Specific need in social interaction, wide network |
| Short and loose interpersonal relations | Long and deeper interpersonal relations |
| Internet use: person - message – interaction | Internet use: person - person - interaction |
| Search for information through click on hyperlinks | Use of comments, feedback, online discussions, newsgroups |
| **e.g. USA, Northern Europe, Germany Switzerland** | **e.g. Spain, France, Italy, Asia, Latin America** |

Table 3: Low Context – High Contect (according to Hall)

## 3 Role of software as a supporting tool for Internet communities

### 3.1 Aspects of possible support

Virtual communities like the Community of Knowledge (Community of Knowledge, 2011) consist of a large number of people, who are communicating in the internet and exchange views on specific subjects. They are similar to virtual organizations (VO) in many aspects. VO is a temporary consortium or alliance of companies that work together with a common goal (Dryndos, et al., 2008). Both, VOs as well as communities need support for data sharing, for communication and for sharing of resources across organizational borders. In the case of VOs various collaboration platforms are established, which provide most of these functionalities (Hayka, Langenberg, & Stark, 2010). However, communities are using wikis, forums, and newsgroups, today. We propose several possibilities for additional support which can be adopted from virtual organizations.

Support for virtual communities by using collaboration and knowledge management software platforms has to meet several challenges. Firstly, communication between the community members has to be improved to reduce the geographical and cultural distances. Secondly, simplified and effective sharing of knowledge has to be enabled. A structured knowledge base is an important step to (re)use common knowledge. Thirdly, management of a community has to be simplified. Figure  summarizes the different possibilities for software support in Internet communities.

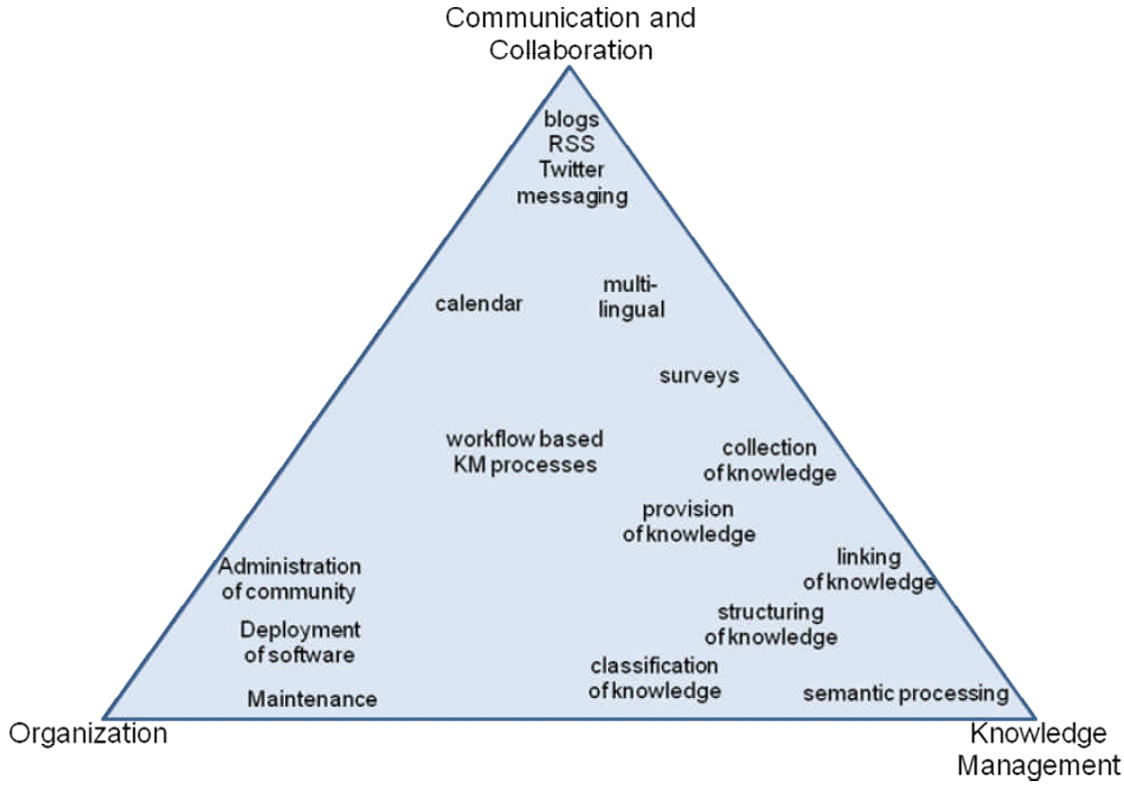


Figure 1: Software assistance for knowledge management and collaboration in Internet communities

### 3.2 Support for communication

When we take a look at the communication aspects, we see at first the current Web 2.0 communication technologies. Especially the internet-based communities ask for the integration of these tools (weblogs, RSS and Twitter-Feeds) into their collaboration environment. These tools help to reduce the distance between the community members virtually and to enable more interactions and spontaneous discussions. Of course, “traditional” communication tools are needed, too. To send email messages is still required. For the communication it is important, to provide diverse solutions in the common platform because of the different cultures. For example the collectivism cultures choose approaches for open discussion in their groups. Other cultures are more focussed on the individual by using direct email or weblogs, which are focussed on the author’s opinion.

Another approach for more interaction inside of the community is to deploy workflows. Today, every member can create input and it is stored in the knowledge base. Perhaps another member reads and validates it – but not necessarily. So the quality of knowledge items in these knowledge bases varies a lot. This phenomenon is visible in most communities, even in the well known Wikipedia community. The implementation of workflows, which enforce reviews for every article before its publication, involves more people in the creation process and ensures a higher level of quality of documented knowledge. Finally, the knowledge becomes more a result of the entire group and new discussions are started. However, workflows mean a big change in collecting knowledge. Especially internet communities with many volunteers prefer open and less restrictive publication processes. So workflows have to be implemented in common-sense and adequate to the behaviour in the community.

Of course, there are other ways to assist interaction between community members. The knowledge platform could include further functionalities for collaboration. For example, common calendars for meetings and task

management support the planning of monochromic cultures, tools for surveys and voting realize forming of opinions in collectivism influenced communities and support for implementing social networks strengthen the integration into bonding groups.

For acceptance in international communities, it is very important that the common platform is multi lingual. In many countries it is preferred to use the native language. At least the graphical user interface has to support different languages. All members should use it intuitively and should feel integrated into the community. For huge international communities, it is useful to write knowledge articles in different languages. The platform should support this multi lingual knowledge management.

### 3.3 Support for collaborative knowledge management and organizational challenges

Main functionality of the software platform is the management of the community's knowledge. It has to support collection, structuring and provision of knowledge. There are different approaches for knowledge management, for example to use a freely semi-structured wiki or a management system for knowledge articles with predefined structures. The community has to decide which approach is to be used. Independent of the chosen approach, cross linking between all knowledge items in the platform is important. There are explicit links, which are set by the users. They describe how articles are connected. Also the members can connect themselves, like it is known in social platforms. On the other side, there are various implicit links between knowledge. Categories, tags, or meta information like authors and creation time express correlations. Especially for the high context cultures this implicit knowledge is interesting, because it describes the background of an article. It is a challenge for future knowledge management platforms to make use of this implicit knowledge.

To improve the management of virtual communities, technical barriers have to be solved. Typically, the maintainers like all members of a community are interested in the domain specific topics – and not in running an information technology infrastructure. Therefore a ready-to-use solution of a specialized provider is required. Then the entire community can focus all efforts on their own topics.

## 4 Future platform for virtual communities

A future platform supports the community in their collaborative work based on the described functions. At first, currently arising cloud technologies give virtual communities new possibilities to operate their infrastructure. Cloud computing is a further development of grid computing technologies (Stark, Hayka, & Langenberg, 2009), which FOSTER defined some years ago as: "Grid Computing is concerned with coordinated resource sharing and problem solving in dynamic, multi-institutional virtual organizations."(Foster, Kesselman, & Tuecke, 2001). Cloud computing shares the same vision (Foster, Zhao, Raicu, & Lu, 2008). Especially the current trend, providing software as a service (SaaS) on a pay-per-use basis, is interesting for virtual communities. They can buy the required IT-solution including (virtualized) hardware, setup, operation and maintenance (backups and security patches), for example a complete knowledge management and collaboration platform.

The knowledge management system *KnowledgeCloud* is an example for such a SaaS solution, which is currently developed in a research project by Pumacy Technologies. Based on the experiences in the knowledge management area and the know-how gained with the implementation of the knowledge management software *KMmaster* (Pumacy Technologies, 2011) Pumacy is developing *KnowledgeCloud*, a knowledge management platform with a new architecture based on cloud technologies and providing collaboration-oriented knowledge management as a service (see Figure ). So it is accessible from everywhere in the internet and none community member has to host the solution. At the same time, the availability is much higher than most community members would typically achieve.

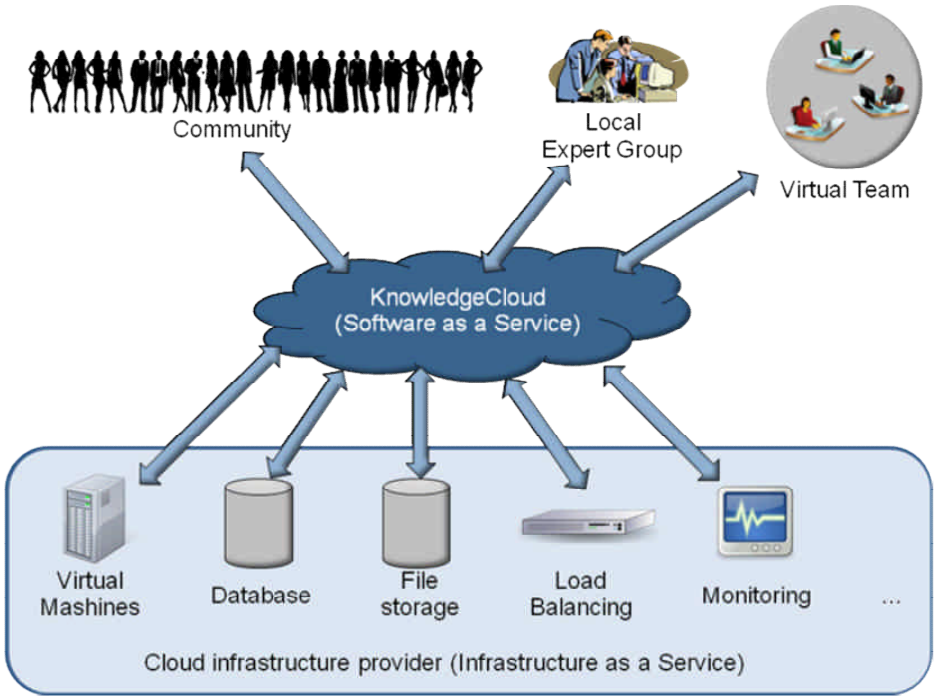


Figure 2: Knowledge management as a service on basis of Cloud Computing technologies

In the future, communities will use collaborative knowledge management service with many of the functionalities described above to support their common work. With the software services like *KnowledgeCloud*, members of the communities will be in the position to work together anywhere in the world across organizational and cultural boundaries.

**Acknowledgement**

The presented results with respect to the knowledge management platform *KnowledgeCloud* have partly been developed during the project KnowledgeCloud. The project KnowledgeCloud lasts from July 2010 until December 2011. It is co-funded by the German Government (Bundesministerium für Wirtshaft und Technik, BMWi, EP101090) and supervised by EuroNorm.

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# How Knowledge May Be Successfully Developed Across Cultural Boundaries

## By Michael Fegerl, Wilfried Wieden

### Abstract

*Increasingly people have to develop knowledge across cultural and language boundaries. Even though recent technologies offer powerful communication facilities people often feel confronted with problems which clearly reduce their chances for making their efforts a success. Concrete evidence concerning such problems is in this article derived from an EU-project in which both authors are currently involved. This contribution intends to describe selectively observed problems and experiences and interim results from the application of procedures and tools to remediate the observed problems.*

### 1 Introduction

In the course of the EU-project **SILMAS** (Sustainable Instruments for Lake Management in the Alpine Space; for details cf. http://www.silmas.eu/), in which both authors are involved, it appeared in the very beginning that the partners from 5 different countries could present their topics fairly well in the selected corporate language English. However, when it came to negotiating specific details of their topics considerable misunderstandings emerged, often only after the specific negotiation process had been ended. In follow-up interactions requests for clarification demanded an increasing (and irritating) share of time.

The objective of this contribution is to make more explicit on the basis of available evidence why cross-cultural knowledge development may be inhibited and how observed problems may be remediated. The approach is data-driven rather than theory-driven: Selected actions which were initiated for this purpose will be described with respect to the achieved positive and negative effects which resulted from the application of these actions. Knowledge management procedures and tools will be described with respect to how they motivated the actions taken.

### 2 Specification of problem

#### 2.1 Selected meta-data

The following evidence derives from observations which were mainly made during face-to-face interactions at project meetings, in part also from online interactions (skype conferences). Project partners represent a fairly heterogeneous group of people: they derive from 5 different countries (France, Italy, Germany, Austria and Slovenia), different educational backgrounds (biology, physics, business administration, tourism, law, teaching), and professional affiliations (free-lancers, full-time employees, managers). All are highly motivated because of the dire need for knowledge standards. The language of interaction was and still is (mainly) English, a language which is nobody's mother tongue. The criteria of analysis derive from a theoretical basis which is discussed in more detail in section 4.

## 2.2 Evidence

Case (a)

Participants made use of one and the same English term, but apparently related it to different concepts (meanings).

Example:
Persons from France made use of the term *lake contract* to refer to 'general agreements about the use of lakes', whereas persons from Italy used the term to refer to 'a specific legal document which applies to one lake only'.

Case (b)

There was agreement across partners to set up new (cross-cultural) types of organizational units, but faced the problem of finding an appropriate designation.

Example:
The new unit is designed to develop new ideas about lake management, implement and test these ideas and appropriate the results for dissemination to the public. French and Italian participants suggested the term *laboratory* for this unit, which the German-speaking colleagues declined, because they had connotations with this term which related to a small room in which only experiments were conducted. The latter group in turn suggested the term *think tank*, which the former group declined because of negative connotations (political jargon). Only the Slowene partners said that they could live with both terms.

Case (c)

After the first stage of project work, which was marked by mutual information about local situations and personal expertise, the coordinators of specified work packages (topics) agreed to collect further data from the rest of the consortium. But feedback of data and information remained scarce and negotiated knowledge largely "insular".

Example:
One partner dispatched a questionnaire concerning 'harbor management', how well regulations were regarded, how much the authorities controlled these regulations, which were the observable negative effects of harbors on water quality. Addressees were highly motivated to participate in the exchange of data, but often communicated that the kind of questions was difficult to answer for them because they did not have comparable harbors at their lakes, had different or no regulations.

Case (d)

Experts from specific domains such as biology or measurement technology did not face serious problems in negotiating knowledge standards within their domain across cultural boundaries, but often had difficulty to make their expertise accessible to experts from other domains (non-experts from their point of view). Participation in discussion therefore often tended to remain domain-specific.

Example:
Biologists addressed topics like 'macrophyte growth' which for partners from other domains was clearly remote.

Case (e)

To negotiate contingencies between different domains, which is one of the core project objectives, partners preferred workgroups within their own cultural and language community, to later report results to the plenum. However, it often turned out that the culture-specific groups discussed different aspects of an assigned topic, which were not immediately compatible with the results reported by others.

Sample topic:
Which are the contingencies between the commercial use of lakes, environmental conditions, etc. and water quality? As indicated, contexts were hardly comparable across different lake instances.

### 2.3 Interpretation of evidence

Case (a) It is assumed that

- for lack of corporate (project) knowledge the terms of the selected corporate language are still related to culture-specific knowledge (e.g. variant legal systems
- compound designations such as *lake contract* are reduced representations of a concept and thus potentially ambiguous, because they do not make explicit the relationship between the two word components (cf. the German example *Babyöl* vs. *Olivenöl*)
- corporate language designations are tacitly translated into the mother tongue to exploit their meaning.

Case (b) It is assumed that

- new concepts are formed, which obviously do not yet have a verbal address
- if established terms are adduced, on the one hand access to the new concept may be facilitated (this process is called *metaphoric extension*, cf. the trivial case of *mouse* in the IT-domain)
- if established terms are adduced, on the other hand unsuitable or even negative connotations are likely to emerge if used across language boundaries (which e.g. was why Mitsubishi failed to sell a car named *Pajero* in Spanish-speaking countries)

Case (c) It is assumed that

- the questions from a culture-specific island of knowledge rather than a draft of corporate project knowledge
- the format of questionnaires did not leave sufficient room for expanding the scope of questions
- the questions did not offer bridges to other domains of expertise

Case (d) It is assumed that

- project partners in this case were dealing with more or less global types of knowledge, which is subject to certain standardization processes in the respective scientific community
- in expert-expert communication the use of highly condensed verbal representations (terms, acronyms, implicit use of language) on the one hand makes much sense, because being more economical (see Terminology in Fig. 1)
- in communication between experts and non-experts condensed verbal representations obviously make expert knowledge more or less inaccessible (see “shorezone functionality index SFI” in Fig.1)
- without explicit reference to more familiar concepts expert knowledge cannot be embedded (sufficiently understood) (see Definition in Fig.1).

Case (e) It is assumed that

- making contingencies between different knowledge domains across cultural and language boundaries is a complex process which involves a number of different parameters

- the parameters include those of quality (e.g. explicit relationships between knowledge types, domains, cultural contexts, see Fig.2), time (sequential constraints in developing corporate knowledge), as well as knowledge representation (e.g. multilingual knowledge representation)
- without adequate procedural guidelines (e.g. identifying commonalities and culture-specific differences between observations) and technical tools the process of cross-cultural knowledge development is unlikely to be successful.

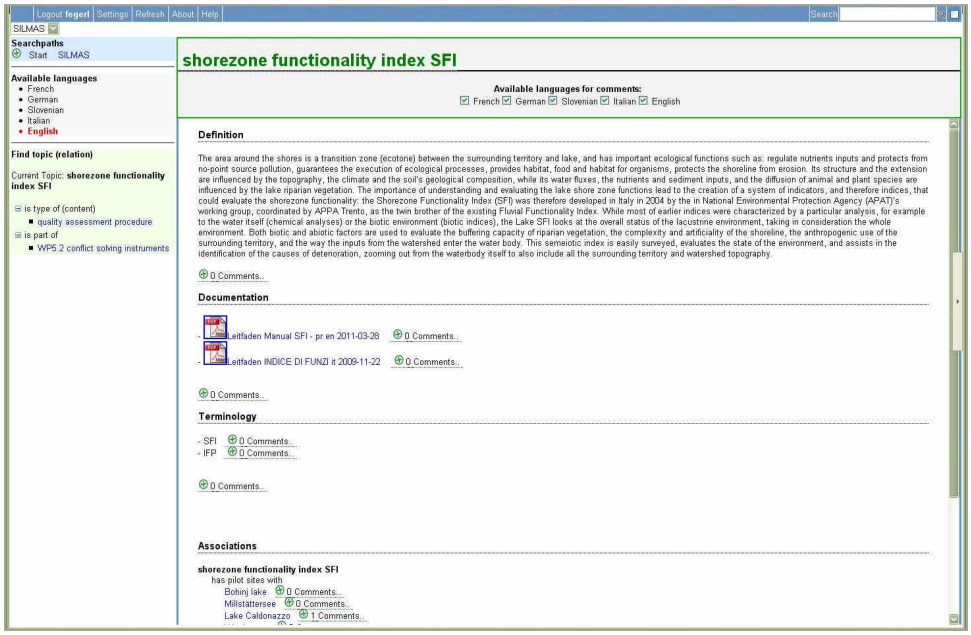


Figure 1: Elements of knowledge - a topic to manage the different languages: designation, definition, documentation and terminology as well as structural information (find topic relations) and bridges between different domains of knowledge (Association)

## 3 Specification of approach

On the basis of conclusions of this type, which do not radically differ from conclusions obtained in other projects which the authors have accompanied, the procedure *knowledge refinement* was designed. This procedure is strongly tied to adequate tool support (multilingual concept mapping facilities) and is being applied and further developed in a growing range of knowledge domains, including the educational, service and production industry sector.

The approach rests mainly on three basic pillars, a practical, a technical, and a theoretical one, with a number of subdivisions. The practical pillar consists of the following processes and involves the following technical facilities:

- Raise awareness relative to expectable problems, e.g. by making explicit that
  - o transmission of documents (including questionnaires) is no guarantee that knowledge has been successfully transmitted, or that the task can be fulfilled
  - o cultural differences among communication partners are a potential source of conflict, but need not necessarily lead to conflict (often people see cultural differences as a resource)
  - o language differences among communication partners are a potential source of conflict, but need not necessarily lead to conflict (it often needs differences in language use to make people aware of differences in knowledge).

- Facilitate access to knowledge, e.g. by
  - defining conceptual knowledge units in a way that they can be sufficiently understood by involved persons, across cultural boundaries
  - representing conceptual knowledge units verbally in a way that they can be searched or communicated unambiguously across language boundaries
  - providing visual support to show knowledge structures and thus help involved persons gain orientation (to be satisfied by knowledge map)
  - providing visual support to make bridges (relationships) between different domains of knowledge (to be satisfied by knowledge map)
  - providing facilities to a knowledge resource which allow users to search for or contribute to knowledge resources by using their mother tongues or a corporate language (to be satisfied by a web application which allows to combine knowledge management, document management, as well as multilingual management).

## 4 Specification of theoretical basis

The theoretical basis rests on pillars of different fields of study, including linguistics, cross-cultural studies, and knowledge management. Beyond consideration of input from these fields, coordinated alignment of relevant input from these studies into a holistic model appeared indispensable. In a highly selective form resources like the following were adduced from the given domains.

### 4.1 Linguistics

Model building rested heavily on findings from linguistic semantics. What seems worth mentioning in this context is the clear distinction between language-driven (*semasiological*) and knowledge-driven (*onomasiological*) approaches to semantics (for details cf. Lyons 1995, Busse 2009). Even though linguistic semantics is predominantly oriented at the language-based approach, model procedures in multilingual contexts were found to require a knowledge-based approach. Only under this approach was it possible to design facilities for the machine-based generation of a multilingual glossary for selected knowledge domains, or for explaining project partners why translation is in many cases undesirable. Since a clear distinction between words and conceptual units is indispensable to provide such facilities and since in German-speaking countries *Wort* and *Begriff* are often confused, the given approach may however be difficult to understand in this community.

Model building is also rested on findings in sociolinguistics and pragmatic linguistcs. These disciplines are mainly dedicated to relating different forms (*varieties*) of language to non-linguistic variables like social groups, professional groups, ethnic groups, types of knowledge, intention, tasks (for further details cf. Wardhaugh 2002, Stockwell 2002, Austin 2005). As experience has shown people without special linguistic training are often incapable of choosing an appropriate register or form of representation to assure that recipients can safely interpret the coded contents, which often seriously impairs the success of knowledge transfer or knowledge development, even if conducted within their native language.

### 4.2 Cross-cultural studies

Sufficient evidence is available on this topic with diverse types of focus, e.g. cross-cultural management (e.g. Apfelthaler 1999, or Holden 2002), cross-cultural communication (e.g. Bolten 2007, or Gudykunst & Mody 2002), or the specific form of knowledge communication (e.g. Reinhardt & Eppler 2004). Attempts were made to link findings from these resources with findings from linguistic semantics, sociolinguistcs and knowledge management to develop more effective solutions e.g.

- for settings where experts need to communicate knowledge to non-experts across language, knowledge, and cultural boundaries
- for making distinctions between culture-specific and global knowledge types which is crucially relevant for term and text translation: e.g. with culture-specific concepts terms should by no means ever be translated, neither should texts if addressed to different target groups (because needing different details of explanation)
- for designing machine-based facilities like a multilingual glossary (which has turned out unfeasible if based on cross-linguistic associations of terms).

### 4.3 Knowledge management

In the given context basically two different resources were adduced for procedure and tool development: On the one hand expertise in knowledge representation (e.g. Sowa 2000, Reichenberger 2010); which were further developed e.g. with respect to multilingual representations, as well as expertise in cognitive psychology (e.g. Eysenck 2006). Insights from both domains of study were adduced for model development (e.g. Wieden 2006, 2010), which will be described separately.

## 5 Specification of procedure

To make culture-specific forms of knowledge accessible across cultural boundaries the authors in cooperation with software developers have implemented the procedure *knowledge refinement* in a new created software (syneris®). The procedure has been derived from the findings indicated above in coordination with the model of conceptual graphs (Sowa 2000). It was further developed into a semantic network design which is heavily indebted to insights obtained from application in various educational and business contexts. The resultant design does not generally follow conventional displays, which rely on principles of empty space (cf. Reichenberger 2010), but on systematic exploitation of the four dimensions 'up, down, left, right' for the purpose of super- and subordination, passive and active associative links. The procedure has the following (recommended) sequential order, but is in part reversible according to the insights quoted above:

| PROCESSES | PRODUCTS |
|---|---|
| (a) specify core topics | - relevant conceptual categories |
| (b) assign specific topics | - relevant conceptual structures |
| (c) assign composite topics | - relevant conceptual network |
| (d) append representations | - (multilingually) documented knowledge |
| (a) – (d) | - refined knowledge |

Representations can be liberally appended upon demand, including terms, comments, explanations, authentic documents, all of these liberally across an infinite number of languages. Technical support should include facilities for concept mapping and multilingual term and document management, to yield a knowledge map as an accessible product or forum for further discussion and to give rise to add-ons like web-based services or dynamic multilingual glossaries.

Process (c) is typically the area where issues of concern are made explicit and process (d) is typically the area where appropriate responses are developed, ideally with respect to posed questions. like why? when? when not? how? ... In the given case questions and respective responses like the following may be formulated:

- Why is it that knowledge refinement may facilitate successful knowledge communication across cultural boundaries? E.g. because

- knowledge structures are invariant across languages,
- individual topics can (ideally) be accessed in different languages,
- culture-specific topics can be defined intrinsically (specifying characteristics) and extrinsically (with respect to superordinate, subordinate, and coordinate topics),
- composite topics can be explained on different levels of elaboration and in different varieties of language for different target groups, if needed.

- When is it that knowledge refinement may not facilitate successful knowledge communication across cultural boundaries? E.g. if communication partners

  - are not fully aware of having particular problems
  - do not sufficiently share particular interests in a project

## 6 Sample evidence from application of knowledge refinement in the SILMAS project

Experience from project work shows that partners involved, all of them expert of some sort, did not start with the core concepts, but chose speficic topics (compounds) as entry points, and that core topics in a later stage had to be derived from the set of compounds and super-imposed.

'Specific topics' include for instance:

- conflict solving governance
- causes (water quality problems)
- instruments (water quality problems)

As soon as relevant compound of specified topics had been sufficiently sub-categorized, attempts at relating them across hierarchy boundaries have been made. An example is indicated in the Figure 2.

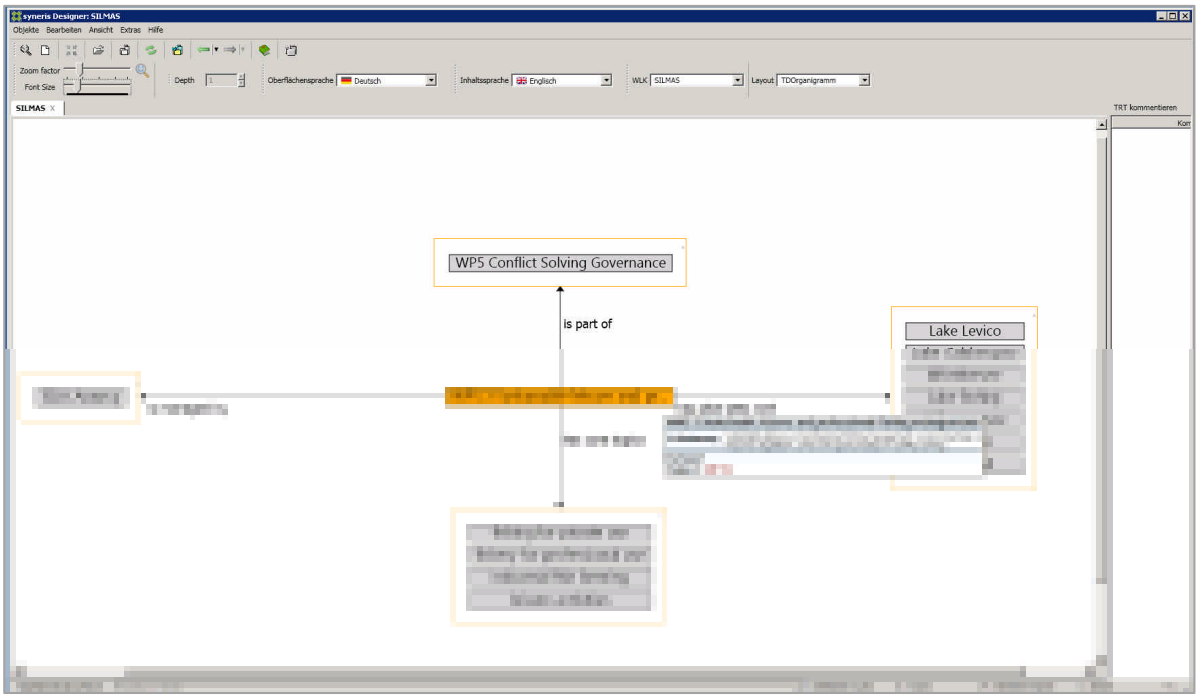


Figure 2: Semantic network for immediate neighbors of the topic 'WP5.3 sustainable leisure and professional fishing'. The pop-up-windows shows the designation, definition (Erläuterung) and terminology (Fachwort) of the topic (work in progress status).

The given selective display makes clear that the specific topic 'WP5.3 sustainable leisure and professional fishing'

- is a type of 'WP5 Conflict Solving Governance' (up dimension)
- has subtypes, like 'individual fishiung', or 'leishure activities' (down dimension)
- has active associates, like 'has pilote sites with' (right dimension)
- has passive associates, like 'is managed by SILA Annecy' (left dimension).

Once the structures has been negotiated and converted into what may be called *corporate project knowledge* a number of representational processes were initiated, including complementation of topic designations or terms to familiarize the non-expert public with specific language uses or authentic documents for specific target groups.

Remarkable efforts in working effectivness have been achieved since the common knowledge map, as shown in Fig.1, is accessible for project partners during negotiations via Skype or personal meetings.

It should be noted, that comments, documents and other types of contents, but not terms and definitions, can also be appended to composite units (e.g. documents with results of measurements are added to the composite unit “macrophyte density - can influence - fish stock”). For successful working with *knowledge refinement* in a cross-cultural project the authors have used a specific software bundle for knowledge design and information management (syneris® ) because it is necessary for understanding to make new corporate knowledge structures visible particularly in a multilingual environment.

Using syneris® it was much easier to explain all project partners involved how the given procedures support the development of complex knowledge and how the tool and its use may assures sustainability even after the project has ended. At the current state of development the first results have clearly emerged, e.g.

- a common knowledge base as web application
- which is open to further discussion and development with a clear conceptual structure (e.g. during skype conferences)
- which specifically invites comments to complex (composite) knowledge units
- which is increasingly enriched with new contents in different languages

and thus increasingly allows dissemination of standard knowledge to non-project stakeholders (e.g. political decision makers across the Alpine space).

## 7 Conclusion

Available experiences suggest that in the context of cross-cultural knowledge development problems of a specific type emerge to which single-source solutions hardly provide adequate responses. But even multi-source systemic solutions, in which findings from different domains are included, do not appear to be easily applicable, at least not without considerable effort on the part of the recipients, since such approaches are yet little familiar (and still think that translation will solve the problem of cross-cultural knowledge communication and development) and since broadly available tools are hardly geared for such demands. In this context one should also note official recommendations of the educational sector of the EU, which strongly recommends multilingual competences as an educational goal for all European citizens, for good reasons. In this project, such competences would have helped a lot. But what motivates continuation of the

respective efforts is that partners in this (and other) projects are increasingly prepared to enter into complex mental activities of this type, if they get adequate IT support, and because the outcome promises considerable added value – cost-benefit relations seem to be well in balance.

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COMMUNITY OF KNOWLEDGE
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# Barriers for an Efficient Management of Knowledge: Experiences From a Southern African Organisation

## By Norbert Herrmann [1]

**Abstract**

*After giving a working definition based on his organisation's understanding of Knowledge Management (KM), the author outlines his 'prospected' method to process KM within his organisation. Based on first-hand experience, in this case study main barriers to implementing the 'prospected' KM process are presented, including some ideas and ways to deal with selected barriers.*
*As the author's experience derives from an intercultural context, this paper addresses issues to consider when working in such an environment.*
*As findings, main cultural challenges are identified as: different influences of hierarchies; language barriers even within a single organisation, differences in individuals' skills, priority of ad-hoc activities and different accessibility and usage of technology.*

## 1 Aim and Assumptions

This paper aims to deliver an overview of barriers and selected attempts to elude these barriers to establishing and maintaining knowledge management (KM). This paper is a descriptive and inductive case or field study-approach[2] intended to provide building blocks for more effective KM implementation.
Main research questions are: "What hinders knowledge management especially in an intercultural context in southern Africa?" and "What are experiences in trying to overcome these hindering barriers?"

As a German in southern Africa, the author implicitly uncovers 'cultural differences' but also uncovers barriers concerning technology, content, processes and routines, some of them interlinked to 'cultural differences'.

Anywhere, each employee and employer has a unique identity, formed by education, family, experiences and other external factors. Thus, the term 'cultural differences' can be used for differences between individuals – no matter how similar the persons under consideration seem to be – as well as differences between groups of people.
Comparing a whole country's culture with another – especially considering southern Africa's ethnical heterogeneity – would only result in invalid generalizations. Additionally, as an organisation consists of different departments, sub-organisations and sub-systems, they are never homogenous entities to begin with. Examples given in this paper neither stand for a whole organisation nor a country's singular 'culture' – taking into account the nuances of both. Some of the experiences and examples quoted here will be very specific, and/or derive from subjective experiences and thus must never be reduced to overarching generalisations. Instead, it seems appropriate to speak of a higher or lower probability of barriers to emerge; or of different characteristics of barriers.

[1] Norbert Herrmann has been "National Advisor: Knowledge Management" since 2009 in a southern African non-profit organisation. He works to trigger, enhance and support KM. There was no formal KM in this organisation before. The organization has a national central (with more than 100 employees situated there) plus regional sub-centres (altogether nearly 400 full time employees). The organisation's focus is youth development, incorporating sports, health, skills development, HIV prevention.
[2] Case study as "… an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context." (Yin, R. K., 1984, p. 23)

This paper introduces a meta-level overview of the organisation's understanding of knowledge management (Chapters 2) plus an initially 'prospected' scenario to introduce and enhance knowledge management (Chapter 3). Possible barriers are identified and examples are given, (Chapter 4). Selected strategies and approaches to face upcoming barriers are presented (Chapter 5), additionally ways of using hierarchies are spotlighted here. General globalization arguments on knowledge management are discussed from the author's experience (Chapter 6) before giving a brief conclusion (Chapter 7).

## 2 Organisation's Definition and Aim of KM

Different models and schemes describe knowledge management within an organisation. Within the presented organisation, an understanding of knowledge management was slowly created, agreed upon[3] and broken down into the following components:

- **People:** as providing the information and looking for and receiving pieces of content
- **Content**: the 'real' pieces that carry information that can generate knowledge[4]
- **Routines** and procedures: secure the ways to provide, collect, forward and access existing and new information
- **Technology**: tools to create, exchange, store and make available these pieces that carry information
- In the **Organisation** people, content, technology and routines are co-existent.

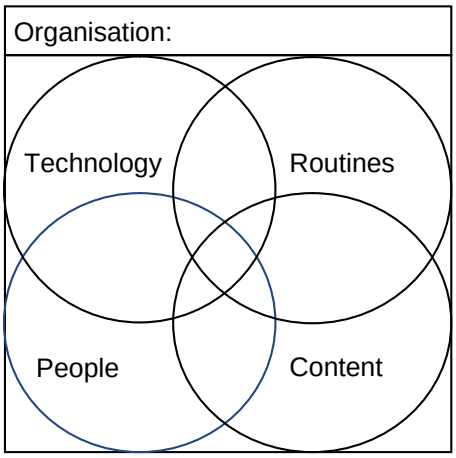

Figure 1: Scheme of KM that was agreed upon in the organisation

The more formalized task of knowledge management – at least decided so in the organisation at hand – is to lead and execute activities to support and enhance single components and sub-components. It is also to support and enhance the connectedness of people, content, technology and routines within the organisation and to take (at least co-) ownership of the process described in Chapter 3. Looking at Diagram 1, KM should make interfaces permeable and identify and support intersections.

An organisation's definition of knowledge management is not always understood the same throughout the organisation. This agreed upon definition of KM is therefore important – but is only the first step towards a transparent and knowledge-sharing organisation. This definition will need clarifications and adjustments again and again as new needs become visible.

## 3 Processing Knowledge Management: from Inventory to Intervention

As till then nobody in the organization has been explicitly responsible for knowledge management it seemed appropriate to firstly get an overview on what is available in the organisation. Thus the prospected first activities[5] of the advisor were described as leading a way through the following:

[3] By iterative commenting and input from the German advisor and responsible co-workers in the organisation. Even if other models might fit as well, this model was the one to agree upon.
[4] Knowledge here is seen as information that was successfully processed by a receiver, see e.g.: Hasler Roumois, Ursula (2007); the distinction between knowledge and information in this paper will only be focused when necessary.
[5] The execution of which quickly would have lead to dealing with barriers and thus devaluing diagram 2

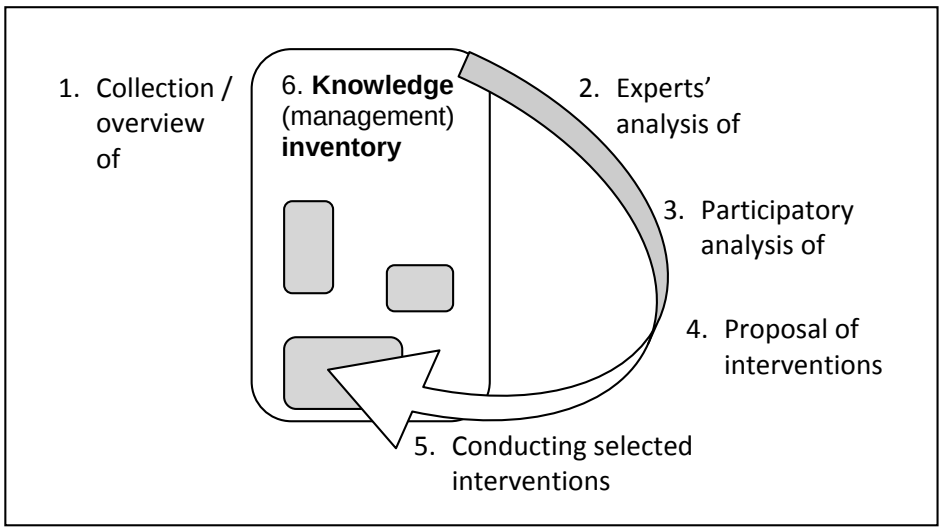


Figure 2: Scheme of a Formalized Knowledge Management

This primary step, according to Luckhardt (no year), "… comprises of classification, selection, acquisition, indexing and storage of knowledge resources" [6], describing the status quo in the organisation. Next, this inventory needs to be analyzed. It would be best to compare this status quo with a prospected situation in order to identify bottlenecks and fields for intervention and amelioration. However, this ideal situation would require a viable description of a prospected situation – which seldom exists, at least not in detail.

1. Collection / Overview of Knowledge Inventory
The knowledge inventory should list and connect all necessary information about the above mentioned: people, routines and procedures, content and technology. Thus, the knowledge inventory is a meta-information centre. Collecting and summarizing this knowledge inventory already is a critical first step where barriers will be encountered.

2. Expert's Analysis
The expert knowledge manager can be used to identify the first signs/avenues for enhancements – just from analysing what is given in knowledge inventory. Considering that the successful implementation of KM can only be achieved when all players are properly involved in the process, the expert's external analysis is only an initial step in defining KM activities.

3. Participatory Analysis
Having the personnel aboard and giving them the space to reflect on their own situation, their own input and their own needs provides very valuable hints. In most cases, participation will strengthen the process and the chances for a change.[7] Participatory processes also help external advisors to understand how the organisation 'functions' from within.

4. Proposal of Interventions
As a next step, personnel involved should work on creating ways to improve knowledge management in the future. Summarizing ideas that have been developed in a participatory manner, and proposing alternatives to resolve bottlenecks and realize enhancements, is one of the main tasks for a knowledge manager. These alternatives may consist of various approaches, like implementing new routines, collecting new information, using new technology, etc.

5. Conducting Selected Interventions
After – in best case: participatory – prioritisation and decision on activities on how to enhance the management of knowledge, these activities should be implemented – thus creating a change in the inventory.

[6] Translation by the author, original in German: "(...) umfasst Sichtung, Auswahl, Beschaffung, formale und inhaltliche Erschließung und Speicherung von Wissensquellen (Daten)".

6. Knowledge Management System
The formalized process of updating technologies, routines, organisational structures and personal skills would then be called 'Knowledge Management System'.

## 4 Reality Check: Barriers for Knowledge Management

Chapter 3 described a kind of 'ideal' process – which may appear rather mechanistic and perhaps even naïve. In reality, working with people is never like a control loop that entails simply scrutinizing problem areas and then re-adjusting these for change.[8]
As mentioned, this paper should primarily be seen as a southern African case study, the examples mentioned below have a higher likelihood to be relevant in southern Africa, but could also help to avoid surprising revelations elsewhere.

The structure of this chapter is based on the categories from chapter 2: technology, content, routines, organisation and personnel.[9] As personnel are found to be crucial for knowledge management, this sub-chapter will be more detailed. Some barriers identified will fit into several categories.[10]

### 4.1 Barriers in Technology

High-end and elegant software solutions could make life easier in many regards. Software for data interchange, archiving, information sharing, communication, work flow management and so on could be quick and easy solutions to restructuring knowledge management.

Technological solutions typically require a budget, however. And this can easily become a giant constraint. Even if free software[11] is available, there is often a lack of hardware; lack of bandwidth and lack of IT literacy when it comes to handling the software, thus making costs rise even higher than comparable 'pay'-software.

Moreover, an organisation can be caught in a technological trap, caused by a long gone decision for special software. Reversing this old decision once the software has been implemented could become impossible – due to financial or reputational reasons or because of a lack of skills.

In some countries, special technologies are more ubiquitous than others. e.g., most people in Africa are more familiar to and used to work with mobile phones compared to computers: "Mobile phone is the African computer. If we want to train health workers in Africa we can't ignore the mobile phone" (Shakei, 2011). According to Greenwood, Louise (2009) and own experience even money transfers work via mobile phone, Chigona (2007) describe extensively used mobile chat applications.

### 4.2 Barriers in Content

To collect content for the knowledge inventory can be hard work – no matter where in the world you are. Transforming implicit knowledge into explicit information is an activity in which special skills and often creativity are needed.[12] Some communication and information processes are very difficult to describe. Few possible content e.g. a description on how to gain special and restricted information, could even be illegal or

[7] Very quickly it can become obvious that there is a inertia within organisations.
[8] And even the chronology of the process described in chapter 3 will hardly ever go alike. There always will be 'pieces' of information that are not (yet) part of the organisation's inventory list.
[9] Alternatively, the presentation of barriers could be structured as described in Chapter 3.
[10] Most of the barriers will also be relevant in other implementation processes other than KM.
[11] See the latest web 2.0 tools as described e.g. in Learners garden.com
[12] Hasler Roumois, Ursula (2007) (above), p 43-44, describes two strategies to transfer knowledge: via code or via the interchange between humans.

against organisational rules. Other examples could include unauthorized informal meetings or exchange via software that is not authorised within the organisation (e.g. Instant Messengers).

Another barrier is linked to individual skills: delivered content may simply not be understood. Maps only make sense if people know how to read them – which is not always the case in southern Africa. To work with digital or analogue audio files as well as video files, people must have the experience or know-how on using a suitable media player.

### 4.3 Barriers in Routines and Procedures

Some processes and procedures that are only claimed to exist, e.g. regular departmental meetings. In addition, work plans or strategy and progress papers may only represent ideal situations that have no link to reality. Some routines may not be recognized as routines by employees – such as everyday joint coffee breaks among staff. Some processes may work in certain cases but not in others or never again – which makes them unreliable. For example: you need to ask a particular person for access to the staff library but if this person does not respond to your request you are stuck without the info you require.

Some work is carried out without planning – which may lead to inventing the wheel again and again. This could be due to a culture of 'last minute' or 'hands on' crisis management. Thus strategic and planned work frequently has a low priority, while variable ad-hoc processes become 'routine', and 'quick and dirty' becomes being 'business as usual'.

### 4.4 Barriers in Organisation

A knowledge-sharing culture in an organisation that is badly role-modelled by those highest in the organisation's hierarchy can hinder knowledge management. High ranking staff may consider themselves to be more important than others – manifesting in not sharing information. Hierarchically-structured organisations appear to be the standard in southern Africa. Here, staff is deeply influenced by line managers' behaviour. Thus, if high ranking members of the organisation are unreliable or don't follow up on activities or do not care, middle and low ranking staff will not either.

Also, "structures are multi-layered, polyvalent, and often contradictory … (and) … maybe invisible even to those who inhabit them." (Ferguson 1990, p17) For instance, the head of organisation could explicitly be telling everybody to use and support knowledge management – but may not apply this instruction to his- or herself. This would strengthen a culture of 'saying but not taking it serious' or 'not practising what you preach' – which hinders all processes, including knowledge management. This culture of 'unreliability' within an organisation makes it difficult to cooperate and succeed.

The cooperation ideal – when it comes to planning and decision making and wanting personnel's ideas to be included in the decision making – can lead to a deadlock. This can be due to the fact that staff members do not understand what the decision is all about and are afraid of admitting this (selective) ignorance. As a response personnel could then choose the strategy of delay. Another reason for refusing to take action on anything or to be decisive can be the uncertainty of the line manager's wish.

Personnel fluctuation seems to play a huge role in NGOs especially in southern Africa. In 20 months from about 100 colleagues 34 quit.[13]

Organisational survival – especially in the face of budget and funding restrictions –is often the main focus, thus strategic issues like 'knowledge management' do not have high priority.

[13] Where 34 is the number of persons I knew. Interesting here, an impression comes up that the organisation itself is much more loyal to personnel than the other way round. Hardly any staff member's contract is terminated by the organisation – which politically and socially can make sense.

From a system theory[14] point of view, any organisation aiming for autopoiesis, recreates itself again and again, and even wants to avoid changes – including changes that concern the sharing of knowledge. The persistency of an organisation also hinders hiring innovative – and thus more likely KM-friendly – personnel.
Interesting would even be to consider information as a currency. Personnel 'pay' with bits and pieces of information – but they will not give it for free.

### 4.5 Barriers in Personnel

The human factor is a key factor. Many of the above mentioned issues are connected to individual behaviour.
A first challenge is that personnel might not have any idea or understanding of what 'knowledge management' is all about; there is no or at least no matching definition of KM in the personnel's mind.[15]

Providing and sharing information can be hindered by a lack of motivation: employees do not receive or do not understand the surplus that comes along with cooperating on knowledge management. All they see is that they have to give information to others – which, from the individual point of view, does not make sense at all, because keeping information secret and unshared can help to secure a job.[16]

Some display of information is meaningless for personnel, e.g. even highly qualified staff do not know how to read a map. Messages may not be properly understood –as prime example, in South Africa there are 11 official languages, English being a second language for the majority of the population. This easily leads to chaotic communication and incorrect transmission of information.[17]

Personnel – even those of high rank – might have difficulties dealing with knowledge-sharing technology – or technology in general. And some of those personnel will not admit to this lack of skills.

When it comes to working on an online questionnaire, for example, some staff do not differentiate between phrasing aspects, how different questions are formulated, and technological aspects, how the submission of the answers will work electronically. Thus, people responsible for technologies feel the pressure of working on enhancement of content and phrasing.

Non-cooperative attitudes of line management and colleagues lead to stagnation, resignation and avoidance of the active search for information. The priority of focusing on-time problems makes it difficult to focus on strategic activities like knowledge management. Personnel often do not seem to have the time for knowledge management procedures during day-to-day work.

As well as each organisation, also each individual – no matter whether operative or strategic staff – has different interests and hidden agendas which could be in opposition to a transparent knowledge management system. People are afraid to lose their job; people are afraid of giving 'secret' information; people do not trust each other. Personnel or co-workers easily suspect a hidden agenda on the part of the knowledge manager – even if this does not exist. This suspicion could lead to reservation and non-cooperation.
The knowledge manager him- or herself may even have a hidden agenda – like carrier planning – that could hinder the proper enhancement in knowledge sharing. He or she might prefer to have a visible output of his / her activities, instead of 'only' influencing the organisation's knowledge sharing culture, which cannot be captured in statistics. Ferguson (1990, p. 40) states: "In 'development discourse', the fact that there are no

[14] See: Luhman. Niklas (1987)
[15] Positively speaking, this 'white space' then could be filled by the organisation's definition. Additionally, people hardy get what a 'national advisor' should be.
[16] Assuming personnel is reflecting about knowledge sharing. Personnel could even be just ignoring.
[17] Regarding languages there can be different filter systems: the (differing) mother tongues, difficulties in English (e.g. 'their' is often mixed with 'there'), the 'tec-speech' of some departments, local meanings of words (e.g. the word 'now' or even 'now now' in southern Africa has the meaning of 'soon' in other English speaking countries). There even could be a filter considering the organisation's language or vocabulary (what is 'Development Intervention', what are 'Lessons Learnt'?) that makes it hard to communicate if coming from outside.

statistics available is no excuse for not presenting statistics, and even made up numbers are better than non at all."[18]

When proposing procedures for knowledge management, different co-workers could support different parts of the procedure, those being parts they can personally benefit from. Different, but also necessary parts of processes and routines are jeopardized by the same person. E.g. cooperating when it comes to creating an online archive for research articles but not providing the own collection of research articles.

From a more political point of view, aiming to gain power could be a main motivator for members of the organisation. Thus, the sharing or not-sharing of information is a sub-function in the quest for power. Sharing information can only be motivated by win-situations for the provider of information.

## 5 Handling Barriers in Intercultural Contexts

As a manager or advisor in KM in intercultural contexts – but also in 'normal' contexts – different strategies to deal with barriers will come up. Find here selected examples plus a proposal considering the hierarchical focus.

### 5.1 Punctual Attempts and Failures and Successes

Identifying barriers isn't that easy as it seems, sometimes co-workers would deny that there is a barrier – this must be an indicator to watch out. Reacting to barriers in most cases will not necessarily solve the problem but lead to the next barrier. Thus being prepared to reflect and to learn will always be necessary, for there will never be an easy pre-describable circumvention for barriers. Here selected experiences from southern Africa.

#### 5.1.1 Approaching Barriers in Technology

When it comes to technology, KM is to address usability aspects ('Keep it simple') and the need of a proper implementation plan – including learning sessions.
The introduction of a new technology is often expected to solve all problems. When there is no budget for this technology people could reckon that all problems are due to this financial restriction. Proper installation and configuration of software and the proper usage often are not seen as a (cost) factor when it comes to deciding on which software to acquire. There is hardly an understanding of what an implementation plan serves for. Cooperating in creating an implementation plan thus ends in being left alone and trying to deal with the acquired software and doing the configuration all alone – after struggling to be allowed to.

The financial barrier I tried to face by proposing to start with free software – which often can be less complex when it comes to usage. Thus for an online questionnaire I used the google forms – and I managed four people buying into that, they now use this tool for additional data capturing purposes. However, proposing cheap or free[19] software is no easy task, especially when there is something like a 'must-have' and already established standard. E.g. there is no chance to change to Open Office.

To reinforce transparency and internal communication an intranet was wished for. As there was a decision on the usage of an eMail server application the search for the intranet software was shortened: the eMail application incorporated a sites-functionality.[20] Thus nobody was against the advisor's proposal to use this

[18] And these 'made up' numbers Ferguson is talking about might easily be influenced by hidden as well as not-so-hidden agendas.
[19] Total costs of free software are far from zero, and also free software needs an implementation plan.
[20] Google apps with sites. Technologically speaking this is an 'extra-net', which via username and password can be accessed worldwide.

available application with no additional costs. The usage of the very same application for archiving and file sharing could not (yet) be established organization-wide – maybe due to the missing proper pre-implementation plan or maybe due to a technology trap: different other (free) hosting/archiving/file-collaboration sites were already used in the organisation. The usage of the calendar within the same application is slowly increasing – because a main player of the organisation is using it and he forces personnel to look into his calendar when it comes to making appointments with him.

Proper usage of existing software is very heterogeneously across personnel, average staff hardly knows how to apply quite 'usual' features of standard software like MS Word and MS Excel. Thus teaching lessons for e.g. how to create a diagram, how to do a mail merge, how to format a word document seemed a reasonable strategy. Only some persons were willing to take part in such one-by-one teaching lessons. [21] But the ones that took part – at least three of them – now get along by themselves.

### 5.1.2 Approaching Barriers in Content

Exemplarily look at the issue of 'directions'. As European I was surprised to find no exact map with all main sites that are supported by the organisation, nor a map to the venues where 'youth training lessons' take place. Trying to get the detailed addresses did not work – because hardly anybody is into this 'address business' or proper addresses simply do not exist. People do ask for directions, where to turn to the left, where to turn to the right.
Additionally, after having created pretty exact maps, those were of no use because often people are not used to read maps. At least we now can generate directions from maps[22] and thus service those who are not used to read maps.

The usage and making public of audio files or video files were to be enhanced, as audio files are produced at least every second week for the national radio stations. It proofed to take more than one year for me to get a hold of some of these audio files, and another half year to establish a routine to have those uploaded by the producer himself to be used as podcast via rss feed.[23]

### 5.1.3 Approaching Barriers in Routines and Procedures

One task of Knowledge Management is to support, simplify and formalize routines and procedures. When it comes to firstly collecting an inventory or at least get an overview of existing routines and procedures it happened that some routines were nicely described and claimed to be carried out in regular basis. But the descriptions only existed on paper, in reality the procedures merely end up to be carried out ad-hoc and without caring about a described process. Consequently a basic idea was to try to establish departmental or/and personal 'to-do-lists' as a fundamental first step to have working plans. In one department I supported this list was never touched by anybody but me.

The attempt to generate procedures for special circumstances, e.g. What to do when a new staff member joins, was more successful, policies and requirement lists and sign-off needs were formalized on paper and these documents were made public in the intranet.

[21] Hinds on why this, and other attempts mentioned, did not work can be found in the chapter "Barriers in Personnel"
[22] E.g. bling maps and google maps would do that
[23] via feedburner

At moment there is an idea to formalize departmental meetings, to have an extendable standard schedule and a standard format to make minutes of these meetings. However, the frequency of departmental meetings taking place largely differs from department to department.[24]

### 5.1.4 Approaching Barriers in Organisation

In southern Africa – as well as possibly elsewhere in the world – hierarchy is a mayor structuring category in organisations. Line managers, directors, executive officers do mainly influence the carrying out of work of all personnel. Their role model is needed to make steps forward to exchange information and knowledge, to create transparency.
Even after several agreements to do so, until today the minutes of the directors' meetings are not in the intranet. The only way to receive strategic information about the organisation often is informal chats – and thus they are a main KM tool. Enhancements on the formal site come from the announcements section of the intranet which is now used more and more often.

Establishing anonymous quick polls as incentives for personnel to access the intranet proved to be quite successful. At the moment we have 85% of overall personnel across the country visiting the intranet at least once a month. Between 40 and 70 poll answers are registered weekly.[25] The establishment of an anonymous suggestion box on the intranet also proofed to make sense, personnel now can shout out their discontent. In 13 months there were 78 entries.

To face the 'ad-hoc culture' within the organisation KM tries to get the phrase 'Implementation plan' into the mind of the decision makers. KM also tries to role model reliability, create an aura of trust and support and thus tries to multiply the willingness to share info and enhance transparency.

KM should help to deal with personal fluctuation. A formalized exit interview form was established to get at least the reasons for quitting and use those answers for mitigating further quitting. A proper leave and handover process only takes place if the line-manager handles this. When asked and incorporated, KM gives advice on archiving documents of the person that quits.

### 5.1.5 Approaching Barriers in Personnel

Lack of skills to use technology can be faced by training sessions and the establishment of technology which is usable. Lack of understanding what KM (and an advisor) is all about can be faced by discussion rounds and presentations. Lack of willingness to share proper information can be faced by creating incentives. Lack of strategic thinking can be faced by repeated confrontation with the need to incorporate strategic thinking.
All these approaches can be performed, but results will always be uncertain. Even the incentive to learn and enhance one's own skills is not automatically working. But it can make sense if the KM persons keep on supporting wherever possible and thus make visible that additional skills can enhance one's own job situation.[26]

[24] One department I am deeply involved with never had a departmental meeting since I joined 20 months ago.
[25] Two interesting polls for characterising the organisation: Asking about the organisation's mission and vision 31 out of 43 answers claimed to know exactly what the mission and vision is, 6 said to have no idea. When asked to briefly describe the mission and vision two weeks later only 5 (more or less correct) answers were registered. When asking about whether people read the organisation's strategy which was send out 2 weeks earlier only 14 persons answered, eleven of them stating they have read.
[26] Assuming that additional skills will help to find a better paid job. This assumption is a transfer from research concerning formal skills, measured in degrees. "The role of intellectual capital can not be underestimated in the continent's drive towards knowledge-based economies." (Kamara 2007, p. 22), see also Castel 2010.

Different hierarchical levels could make use of different enhancements in skills. It seems that management skills and personnel management could make perfect sense in some cases. KM here approaches where possible with advice on formalizing and structuring routines like e.g. departmental meetings and usage of departmental calendars and mailing lists.
The ad-hoc focus can be addressed by repeatedly in advance emphasizing upcoming important events like annual reports or implementation of additional software. KM here should – when incorporated into this process – assist in preparing these upcoming events.

Hidden agendas seem to be one main barrier for proper participation in KM. Especially in intercultural context the strategy of directly addressing these hidden agendas – when recognized as such – must cautiously be used, especially persons in a higher hierarchy are not used to be addressed openly. One alternative is to 'unhide' one's own agenda and thus start creating an aura of trust.

### 5.2 Hierarchy Focus Approaches

Here, two alternative approaches for KM from a more hierarchical focused perspective are presented – keeping in mind that hierarchy plays an important role in southern African countries. Maybe the third alternative as a kind of synthesis can do better.

#### 5.2.1 Top down – Leadership gives strong mandate

Pressure from top management to cooperate with KM could be an adequate measure to enforce intra-organisational cooperation. However, this pressure needs to lead to ownership of (selected) personnel in KM processes. In reality, personnel will always find ways to foil commands. Economically speaking, for some personnel the expected added value from strictly obeying the orders is lower that the expected value from not strictly obeying the order.

Opposing targets could be: securing one's own power; securing one's own work space; minimizing the own amount of work; and maximising influence.
Top-down approaches could even increase defensive demeanours of employees that are suspicious of things and processes they are not familiar with. Top-down approaches in particular need authentic role modelling from top management to ensure the credibility of knowledge management.

#### 5.2.2 Bottom up – Building Trust

On the other hand, the person responsible for knowledge management could build trust, relationships and identify a network – even if it is informally[27] – of interested persons. Those persons then are not forced to cooperate but are interested to cooperate – such self-motivation and ownership makes cooperation much easier, no matter where.

The co-workers personal value added could be the 'special know how' they receive as a cooperating employee. As 'first movers' those persons would receive special support by the advising knowledge manager, and would acquire additional skills in dealing with technology and procedures. And those persons – together with the responsible person for knowledge management – can be seen as role models and motivation for all staff.

However, the gap between verbally expressed agreement and real action can also be bigger than expected in a bottom-up scenario. And it may take time to identify those who are interested in cooperating.

[27] One important task for the person in charge of enforcing KM could be visibility in the organisation. Here, even simple things like e.g. sitting in an office where (all) personnel must pass each day can help a lot.

### 5.2.3 Viable Mix

Knowledge management and the persons responsible for it need some kind of mandate from the top levels of the organisation, at least to start processes and cooperation. A clarification of assignment between top management and advisor KM will make sense. As the human factor and motivation are key, there additionally is a need to build trust within the operational ranks. Within the process of enhancing knowledge management, an important factor is acknowledgement for the work of all participants.

Looking back to Chapter 3, 'Processing knowledge management: from Inventory to Intervention', a very first step (Step Zero) needs to be added, even before the collection and overview of knowledge inventory: Building trust; receiving a kind of mandate; explanation to personnel.

In reality, all successive steps of the process described in Chapter 3 need to be repetitive and from time to time new 'pieces of information' or processes have to be added to the inventory.

Top down and bottom up need one another. In some situations it is crucial to have the CEO's mandate. In other situations, the commitment of the employees is necessary. The process of establishing effective knowledge management needs reliable participation from top level as well as the operational level. If the establishment of knowledge management is to go beyond punctual enhancements, it needs participative and sustainable cooperation that includes all levels.

Dealing with decision makers who are not familiar to KM requires patience and diplomacy. A viable route might be that a decision is prepared by the expert. Personnel must still be incorporated, however – after making clear the pros or chosen alternatives by the expert. If available, including the Line Manager in the cooperation of personnel will also help.

In the Bertelsmann paper (Bertelsmann-Stiftung, 2006, p.5,8,9) it is stated that interacting in an intercultural environment should always be effective and appropriate.[28] From my point of view, under some circumstances it might also be effective to sometimes act inappropriate:
If the knowledge manager or advisor has an 'external' position, he or she can make use of this externality. There is not always a need to adapt all habits and routines that are already established within an organisation. As an external, he or she can act more freely, and can even have the freedom to run activities that would normally be considered as *faux pas*– from operational or from top level management. This can help to raise awareness on the issue of knowledge management and might come closer to achieve the set goals.[29]

## 6 Globalized Knowledge and Outlook

Knowledge is ubiquitous – this is what we are told in these days of internationalization and globalization. The author remains dubious about this sweeping generalization that leaves little room for contextual factors.
Bandwidth in African countries may improve;[30] internet access prices are decreasing; and mobile phones as receivers could increasingly be available – but as long as income, especially in rural areas, remains as it is, no person and no small organisation will be financially able to access this global knowledge.
The digital divide is not only infrastructural, it is also a financial, skill and educational divide. IT literacy is not in high gear all over the globe, especially not in rural Africa.

Assuming global knowledge is available and accessible, it will often only be of minor use in local organisations. Knowledge about knowledge sharing technologies, about transparency, and about proper knowledge management may make perfect sense in some parts of the world it may be impractical or inapplicable other parts of the world. For instance, elegant and perfect software solutions are a non-practical

[28] Here the proper meaning of these two words is not anayzed
[29] I am fully aware that there is not general guideline, all activities need reflection and – empathy will help in most cases.

idea in a rural African organisation; video-conferencing does not work when nobody knows how to establish a connection, whereas SMS/text conferences that work in southern African could be viewed as ridiculous in European contexts. In the global knowledge inventory - the internet might be defined as - solutions for rural organisations' problems are (still) rare.

In many cases, relevant knowledge is not explicit. Organisations often do not have the chance to make this information explicit either, e.g. due to a lack of individual language skills, a lack of verbal or drawing skills, or a lack of skills to describe in proper structure. And making information explicit can also be hindered by ethnical, moral, cultural or legal constraints or labour law provisions. In specific circumstances, personnel chose to keep silent in order not to compromise themselves or others or disrupt the status quo.

Even if English as a lingua franca is spoken all over the globe, there will always be additional language barriers in particular contexts.[31]

## 7 Outcomes for Knowledge Management

When cooperating can be a challenge in international and intercultural contexts, advising on knowledge management can be a challenge as well. How to support managing knowledge if the knowledge manager could be excluded – by different barriers – from this knowledge?

Thus, not each and every KM activity may result in visible or direct outputs. The output may be implicit and not measurable, e.g. a rise of the awareness on knowledge management. The knowledge manager may not even realize how many changes he or she has triggered.
The performed activities of KM in the organisation under consideration sometimes ended up to be isolate. However steps forwards were performed. For the involved co-workers the acquainted knowledge will be sustainable, for the organisation the sustainability of the performed KM activities can be achieved if the activities will keep on being executed regularly, even if staff is changing, like e.g. updates in the intranet.

Patience, personal relations and networking within the organisation seems to be the first step for successful advising on KM – and not just in intercultural contexts.
Additionally a knowledge manager in an intercultural context especially needs to keep in mind:

- The language barriers hinder a common understanding and a proper communication, even within the organisation,
- Creating an inventory can be a good starting point but the KM process should be flexible enough to quickly focus on – sometimes even ad-hoc – identified bottlenecks,
- Formalizing processes won't always work, informal processes could play an even bigger part in southern Africa compared to Europe – often these informal processes work fine.

Never ending study area can be the importance of informal processes. Studying the importance of enhancement of skills for operational and for higher level personnel could make sense – to be able to strengthen further development cooperation activities.[32] Comparing different case studies helps to falsify wrongly made assumptions from singular observations.

And always to be kept in mind: people, organisations and societies have survived for centuries without western knowledge management. Changes cannot – and should not – be established within a short time frame. Cultural identities won't change simply because people from outside tell what they think is better. Even external advisors won't avoid to learn from working in an intercultural environment, thus – next to

[30] Se e.g.: Internetworldstats (2010) Internet usage and population statistics
[31] See footnote 17
[32] alike GIZ / inwent

experiencing possible conflicts – also emending "… the prospects of business and private environments that are labelled by cultural diversity." (Bertelsmann 2006, p. 5)[33]

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[33] Translation by the author, original: "… die Chancen eines von kultureller Diversitaet gekennzeichneten beruflichen wie privaten Umfeldes."

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# Knowledge Sharing and Cross-Boundary Collaboration in an European Union Social Research Organisation. Is Cultural Diversity a Key Factor?

## By Barbara Schmidt-Abbey[34]

**Abstract**

*One challenge for knowledge sharing in a multi-national, multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder 'polyphonic' organisation consists in uncovering and communicating underlying mental models.*
*This observation is illustrated by examples of knowledge sharing experiences in one supra-national organisation referred to as a case example – the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.*

**Some assumptions about 'cultural diversity' as a factor for knowledge-sharing in Eurofound, a European Union 'tripartite' social research organisation:**

'Cultural diversity' in the context of this European Union multiple stakeholder social research organisation can be observed to be rather multi-layered and fluid – an ever-changing 'cultural diversity kaleidoscope' rather than a static picture, which does not lend itself to easy classifications and certainly not to easily transferable 'recipes'. Traditional anthropologic concepts of 'culture' appear to be of rather limited explanatory power in this operational context. The specific organisational context is the contingent within which the unique mix of factors contributing to or hindering the sharing of knowledge in a multi-cultural organisation in the widest sense.

**Knowledge management in cross-cultural organisational contexts**

Whilst the body of knowledge management literature is broad-ranging and continually growing, there appears to be a persistent lack of robust research of the multi- and cross-cultural dimensions of knowledge management. This is somewhat surprising, particularly compared to a continued (but perhaps somewhat receding) focus on technological aspects of knowledge management on the one hand, and a quite large body of literature in other disciplines of management and social science which deal with cross-cultural issues. This particular inter-disciplinary combination of the aspects of knowledge management and cross-cultural management and its implications is however still relatively underdeveloped in the literature, as can be experienced when searching management literature database for this combination of keywords.

In the last decade, a number of attempts have been made in the literature to advance these issues further, but it appears that the expected breakthrough has yet to happen (for example, see works by Holden, 2001, 2008 and 2010). However, a comprehensive analysis of these developments, as well as an exploration of the management literature on 'culture' and cross-cultural management' is outside the scope of this article, and could be subject of a separate literature review. Omissions of arguably relevant articles in this body of literature are a deliberate limitation for the purpose of this article, as its focus is on using a real-life example case to explore some assumptions and observations. Further research would undoubtedly be necessary to come to conclusive evidence.

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Of particular interest in focus of this article is the application of knowledge management in multi-cultural, supra-national organizational contexts.

C. Ringel-Bickelmaier and M. Ringel (2010) have recently written about knowledge management in international organisations, in which they describe the knowledge management approaches taken by international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the European Union (EU) institutions. In common with other multinational enterprises, international organisations are formed by '*highly diversified staffs'*, which implies that *'an effective knowledge management approach needs to take into account possible cultural barriers to knowledge sharing'* (De Long and Fahey, 2000, quoted in Ringel-Bickelmaier and Ringel, 2010).

Ringel-Bickelmaier and Ringel observe that in general, specific provisions for managing cultural diversity and dealing with cultural aspects in knowledge sharing do not seem to be in place in most of the organisations they studied. These general observations from the reviewed literature provide the background to exploring the case of one particular European knowledge organisation as an example.

## Experiences of knowledge sharing and cross-boundary collaboration – case example of "European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions" ('Eurofound')

### About the organisation

Eurofound, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, is a European Union (EU) agency, one of the first to be established, to work in specialised areas of EU policy.[35]

Eurofound was set up by the European Council in 1975 to 'contribute to the planning and design of better living and working conditions in Europe'. Its role is to provide information, advice and expertise on living and working conditions, industrial relations and managing change in Europe, for key actors in the field of EU social policy on the basis of comparative information, research and analysis, on the themes of employment and working conditions, work–life balance, industrial relations and partnership, and social cohesion. As a 'tripartite' agency, its key target audiences are EU policymakers, social partner organisations (employers and trade unions) at EU level and in the 27 EU Member States, and national governments. [36]

### Knowledge management in Eurofound

The task description for Eurofound derived from its mandate in its founding regulation makes it quite clear (although it is not described as such) that Eurofound de facto is a knowledge management organisation: Eurofound is tasked with sourcing, producing, transforming and communicating knowledge pertaining to its subject domain (improvement of living and working conditions in Europe), and ensuring these results are available for its key target audience of EU policy makers. For this to succeed, a range of organisational, structural and contextual enabling factors need to be in place, and barriers need to be overcome for effective knowledge sharing to take place. Whilst this is true for any organisation, the mix of factors that constitute the barriers to sharing knowledge is specific to Eurofound.

[35] http://europa.eu/agencies/community_agencies/index_en.htm
[36] www.eurofound.europa.eu

A rather unique feature can be found in the *specific character of Eurofound as a 'tri-partite' agency,* which affects all aspects of Eurofound's work and the context within which this takes place, making it a 'polyphonic' organisation composed of several different 'voices' on a topic (see Kornberger et al, 2006 for the concept of polyphonic organisations).

Eurofound is governed by a Governing Board consisting of representatives from employers, trade unions and governments from all 27 EU Member States and at EU level. This multi-stakeholder makeup illustrates an aspect of 'cultural diversity' rather rarely referred to in the reviewed literature – that of multiple voices concerning the same issue, which by nature encompasses different views and different 'knowledges' (epistomologies) on a broad range of topics, which need to be reconciled and served. It is in this aspect that Eurofound faces it greatest knowledge management challenges. With view to its core tasks, some innovative tools to address this aspect of 'polyphonic diversity' have been developed by Eurofound over its three decades of practice. A particularly relevant example for the subject of this article is the example of the "Foundation Seminar Series" (FSS).

**The example of 'Foundation Seminar Series' as a tool for sharing knowledge and experience on social policies amongst European actors**

As part of Eurofound's tasks to facilitate debate, the aim of the "Foundation Seminar Series" (FSS)[37] project is to provide opportunities for knowledge-sharing that could facilitate a better decision-making process in European social policy and help social actors at national level to meet the goals of the European Union's 'Lisbon Agenda' (until 2010), and its successor, "Europe 2020" . The FSS in its present form has been in existence since 2004 and is currently running its seventh edition. The specific objective of the FSS is to compare national situations in relation to the chosen seminar topic with European objectives and the views of employers, trade unions and representatives of public bodies. Through the FSS, Eurofound implements one of its central tasks, to contribute to shared knowledge and experiences in its domain of 'improving living and working conditions in Europe', across the EU Member States, by offering representatives of the social partners and public authorities an opportunity to discuss European social issues and deepen their understanding of the implications at national level. 'Tripartite' representation is the key element for a successful and sustainable debate at national level. Therefore, representatives of the unions, employers' organizations and governments of the EU Member States are invited to participate in the two-session seminars dedicated to a specific topic. Topics covered by consecutive FSS seminars over the years included "Age and work" (2004), "Sustainable and flexible work organisation" (2005), "'Flexi-curity' and employability (2006), "Youth and work" (2007), "Developing workers' skills" (2008); "Maintaining employment in times of crisis" (2009-10), "Skills development in Europe – challenges and actions" (2010-11).

The overall learning process is spread throughout four steps, as illustrated in Figure 1:

[37] www.eurofound.europa.eu/events/fss.htm

1. *[Month N - 2]:* ***Assembling 'national tri-partite teams'*** from ca 10-12 EU countries for both sessions: national teams are composed of representatives from 'Social Partners' (Employer and Trade Union representatives) + national government = invitees to Foundation Seminars.
2. *[Month N]*: ***1st seminar session (typically in spring)***: background papers, topic presentations, mapping European trends, initiating networking, setting of assignment task on national policies and contexts.
3. ***National teams collaborate on assignment tasks*** to prepare a joint presentation on national policies and experiences at 2nd session workshops and debate.
4. *[Month N+5]*: ***2nd seminar session (typically in autumn)*** : presentations by national tripartite teams of their assignments to the other national teams: national situation presentations and company examples; discussions
5. ***Post-event networking amongst participants*** and practitioners and further knowledge sharing between participants.

Figure 1: Foundation Seminar Series structure and learning process

In terms of knowledge sharing, the FSS can be described as the building of temporary tri-partite 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999), by bringing together multiply diverse teams to work together on the set topic and tasks over a longer period. Through thisprocess (typically spanning a period of six or nine months for the entire four step process), members from the different groups from several EU countries (employers, trade unions, and governments, and at times, company representatives) are brought together to exchange practices in their respective country with teams from other EU countries. The tripartite members from each country have to form a 'national team', and must work together on their respective assignments which they must present jointly at the second session (some months after the first session).

The following tables illustrate the structure and multi-national and multi-stakeholder interactions within the framework of the Foundation Seminar series:

| *Topics* | *National governments (ca 12 participating countries)* | *National Social Partner representatives (ca 12 participating countries)* | *European level Social Partner organisations* | *Companies (presenting good practice case examples)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ageing and work | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Flexible work organisation | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Youth and work | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Skills development of workers | √ | √ | √ | √ |

Figure 2: Composition of representation of collaborative team members working on FSS topics (example)

A recent ex-post evaluation of Eurofound's 2005-2008 work programme (Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, 2010) has looked at the Foundation Seminar Series as a case study, with predominantly positive results. This evaluation provides evidence about the effectiveness, utility and sustainability of effects of the Foundation Seminar Series, and some of its findings are useful to be reinterpreted under the perspective of FSS as an instrument for knowledge sharing across national and political 'borders'.

***Knowledge sharing results and outcomes:***

Through the FSS collaborative knowledge sharing and learning process, 'cultural diversity' is addressed at two separate levels:

**1)** ***tri-partite collaboration in the same national context:*** by bringing together the three 'sides of industry' (employers, trade unions and governments) at their own national level in a 'national team' to jointly work on the assignment for the second session. This constellation means that the participants in the national team typically hold divergent and often even opposite views on the matters under discussion, especially employers and trade unions. For example, when preparing the national situation assignment for the FSS seminar on 'ageing and work', the trade union representative of 'Country A' is likely to approach the assignment from a trade union point of view, emphasizing what is important in the national debate for the unions – for example, emphasizing the working conditions of older workers. The employers' representative on the national assignment team for Country A by contrast may emphasize the productivity and company performance aspects of employing older workers. The government representative of Country A may bring the perspective of the effect on the social security system and pension provision in the country, and the policy implications the national government of Country A advocates from that perspective. Oftentimes, the trade union and employers' representatives in particular in a given country would normally encounter each other on opposite sides of the table in their day-to-day work, for example in collective bargaining or other negotiation situations, and their interactions with each other (personally or through the organisations they represent) would typically hold and express opposite views, and may assume rhetorical 'positioning' in discourses with each other.

Through the joint collaboration on the FSS assignments as a national team, participants often find themselves in a new situation: with the objective to jointly present and explain the situation as seen by their sides in their own country to their counterparts from several other countries, the participants have to learn to go beyond their usual 'stances' in their interactions with each other, and to work together as a team for the purpose of the assignment. As a country team, they have to work through several stages of team forming, see Tuckman (1965): 'forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning'). Whilst this collaboration will of course not mean that they relinquish their positions and points of views, they have achieve a different level of discourse with each other from the background of having to jointly explain their country specific circumstances to other national 'tripartite' teams. As part of the 'storming' phase, an externalization and challenge of each other's 'mental models' (Senge, 1990) would inevitably occur, resulting eventually in some sort of shared 'mental model' in the 'norming' and 'performing' stages - at least in order to arrive at a joint presentation of their respective different views on the topic for the purpose of sharing the results of their collaboration with the other national teams at the next session.

**2)** ***Engaging with diverse national practices in other countries:*** This collaboration in the national teams prepares the next level of dealing with 'diversity' – that of different practices between different EU Member States, where a different layer of 'team learning' is accomplished. At the second seminar session, the different national tri-partite teams present their country situation in relation to the seminar topic to the participants from the other countries. From the juxtaposition of very diverse country situations (e.g. on ageing and work), participants gain a broader appreciation of the diversity of national contexts and policy options across Europe, and by comparison with the situation in other countries are able to re-evaluate their own countries' situation, and (possibly) see their own partisan position from a different perspective. Reported feedback from FSS participants[38] suggests that oftentimes, social partner participants are often more

[38] Anecdotal evidence on participant feedbacks reported by FSS project leader, Isabella Billetta (19 April 2011)

empathic to the viewpoints expressed by the 'opposite' social partner representative in a different country. For example, a trade union representative from Country A may express more understanding of the employer representative's position from Country B than he/she may have towards an employer representative from their own Country A.

**Evidence of effectiveness of FSS for knowledge sharing**

The evidence base is not sufficiently broad enough to draw final conclusions on the knowledge sharing effectiveness of the FSS, and is currently largely relying on the 2010 ex-post evaluation where the FSS was included in the survey and features as a case study, and further anecdotal evidence provided in interviews with the project leader. Further research would need to be conducted to draw more reliable conclusions on how effective the knowledge sharing in the FSS actually is, and what the critical success factors would be.

However, there is some evidence in the 2010 ex-post evaluation which confirms that FSS participants do find the seminars *'highly useful. They frequently share the information and apply it to their work at the national level.* Some examples of participant feedbacks are quoted in the evaluation report, for example: *"I find it useful to discuss the issues with the representatives from both sides, employers and trade unions, and from other EU countries and learn what is going on there".* (Ex-post evaluation, p. 61).

The aspect of knowledge sharing in the FSS has also been addressed in two questions in the ex-post evaluation survey: the question "have you shared what you have learned through the seminar(s) with colleagues?" has been answered positively by some 48%, saying that they have done so 'very' or 'quite' often, where the extent of sharing tended to be relatively high amongst employee organisations and lowest amongst employer's bodies. About 40% of respondents had applied what they have learned during the seminars to their work either often or sometimes, where the FSS seemed to be most useful to Government representatives (Ex-post evaluation, p. 60).

According to reported feedback statements by individual participants collected by the FSS project team, the participants in the national teams develop a higher level of understanding of the other parties' position through the externalization of their mental models, and deeply held assumptions and beliefs. The collaborations also have a reported longer-term effect: a survey of FSS participants in the ex-post evaluation (2005-2008) has revealed that 80% of participants of the 2008 FSS were still 'often' or 'sometimes' in contact with their fellow participants from their own country for professional purposes over a year after the seminar, and this was still the case for over 63% for the participants in the earlier FSS seminars (Ex-post evaluation, 2010, p. 62).

Despite no conclusive evidence being available at this point, there may be several factors which could be involved in effective knowledge sharing taking place across national and cultural boundaries in the context of the FSS: There may be a less pronounced preconceived 'view' of the 'other side' from another country (as they are not likely to be in a negotiation situation with these participants) (less 'stake' is involved); possibly Country B has some policies implemented at national level which may be looked at favourably by the trade unionist from Country A. Whatever the explanation (which could be explored in further research), the views of participants collected to date is predominantly positive, as evidenced by the ex-post evaluation of Eurofound's 2005-2008 work programme.

**Emerging conclusions**

From observations about the Foundation Seminar Series by Eurofound as a practice example of cross-boundary knowledge sharing on social policy topics across national boundaries within the European Union, it is becoming clear that there are a broader range of 'diversity' factors in place with view to cross-national and cross-'party' knowledge sharing, which could be explored in further research from the knowledge sharing perspective, or future evaluations. They do point to the existence of 'polyphony' of different 'voices' and perspectives on the issues involved, and the FSS could be regarded as a practical example of managing this 'polyphony' through a 'discursive practice'( as suggested by Kornberger et al., 2006).

In the multi-disciplinary and multi-national context of a multi-stakeholder environment such as the 'tripartite' context in which Eurofound operates, there are inevitably different intellectual and academic traditions and assumptions which influence knowledge, world views and 'mental models' of actors within it (see Senge, 1990) – consciously, or unconsciously. For example, different academic and/or political 'schools of thoughts' can clash with each other implicitly in the discourse about social policy topics: e.g., economists versus sociologists views, or 'neo-liberal' versus 'marxist' ideas can influence concepts (either factually, or suspected in the 'opposite' stakeholder view, especially along the employer/trade union divide in the 'social partner' context). In the worst case this can lead to taking polar 'stances' which are difficult or impossible to reconcile, at best, these differences can be made explicit, and thus communicable, which is the objective of the FSS.

In terms of place of origin of participants in knowledge sharing contexts (e.g. the FSS), the respective *national legal frameworks* would appear to play a certain role in shaping individuals' understanding of the relative role of specific concepts. For example, in some countries certain features of labour law and industrial relations are normatively defined as part of legislation, whereas in other countries the same topics may be subject to bi-lateral negotiations between the social dialogue parties, or in others, by sectoral collective agreements. Expectations and knowledge of industrial relations concepts is therefore highly contingent on the reference point and national context. To remedy this, Eurofound also maintains an online 'European industrial relations dictionary'[39] of industrial relations terminology in use in the different EU countries, which helps to explain the specific meaning of industrial relations concepts in a specific national context to readers external to that country. Such taxonomic efforts can be useful support tools to draw on to assist the sense-making and unearthing of the underlying mental models in the FSS discourse situation.

The structure and working method of the FSS has been proven effective to an extent, in that the available evidence shows some sustainable results as measured by continued contact with participants over time. The building of temporary 'communities of practice' to jointly work on an assignment with a specific purpose (presentation at a subsequent seminar session), and the subsequent engagement of the national teams with other national teams on the same topic appears to be effective to an extent, but further research could be usefully conducted to get more reliable data in order to make causal inferences.

- In the absence of such clear evidence, it can be assumed for the moment on the basis of the available data and observations that some critical success factors can be identified from the experience of the FSS:
- *Commitment from the outset by participants and their sending organisations to work on topics over a sustained period* (it is requirement to commit to the entire duration of a FSS seminar and participation at both sessions and the assignment);
- *Effective facilitation by the organisers* (Eurofound), supported by well established and respected external expert inputs to preparations, e.g. background papers and introductory material (experts e.g. from European Commission, OECD, or Internal Labour Organisation etc.).

[39] http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/index.htm

- *Facilitation and continued communication from organisers with participants during the assignment period is also important*, to ensure engagement between sessions. The commitment to having to present national team efforts at the second sessions focuses participants' contributions appears to be a high motivator for the national teams to work effectively, confirmed by the reported fact that every country team has so far 'delivered' on their assignment tasks.
- *Investments in terms of provision of appropriate venues and meeting facilities, and reimbursement of participants* are seen as important success factors enabling commitment by the organisations. It could be tested further to what extent factors such as reimbursement are really necessary, or could be replaced by other intangible motivators.

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