Knowledge-as-Action and Knowledge Development

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Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at the way in which knowledge development programmes are constructed by management in organisations. It is suggested that even though an increasing number of individuals in charge of human resource management is realising that knowledge development is not only concerned with the spreading of information, the difficulties arise when theory has to be put into practice. The paper is a pilot study for a larger project on knowledge development in mergers and acquisitions and is based on the empirical material collected by means of open-ended interviews with human resource managers at 11 large Swedish multinational corporations over a period of roughly half a year. Above all, we will argue that managers can explicate their novel thoughts on knowledge management, but when knowledge development is implemented in organisations, they act within the confines of their existing understanding of reality which is based on modernistic ideals of abstract, expert knowledge and rational tools of making the world more transparent.
Introduction

The conscious use and dependence on knowledge in all spheres of human activity has reached an unprecedented level and has produced far-reaching and virtually irreversible social consequences. Although these changes are all-encompassing and highly evident, our conceptual clarity and insight into the nature of knowledge is to a high degree deficient. It is true that the importance of knowledge is today stressed almost everywhere, especially when considering human resource and knowledge development in organisations; it is, however, equally true that knowledge is at the same time often treated as a black box or, at the most, as an object. It is introduced into many discussions in a narrow fashion without much theoretical or epistemological reflection. Our knowledge about knowledge, and the consequent definitions that arise, are often taken for granted. This is problematic when considering knowledge management, as we generally have to identify and define something before we can manage it. But, knowledge development is basically nothing new. It has been around for hundreds of years. Owners of family businesses have passed their commercial wisdom on to their children, workers have exchanged know-how and ideas on their job, and master craftsmen have painstakingly taught their trades to their apprentices. Suddenly, in the 1990’s, management invented knowledge management. This happened in line with the shift of the foundations of industrialised economies from natural resources to intellectual assets. Executives were compelled to examine the knowledge underlying their businesses, and the ways in which that knowledge was used.

Since knowledge management as a conscious practice is a relatively young phenomenon, managers in organisations have lacked adequate models with which to guide their actions consistently. What has been easily accessible, however, is an overwhelming abundance of literature on how knowledge management could work in theory. Given the deficiency of reflection on the essence of the resource, which is to be managed, these attempts have been often problematic in practice (see e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). They have, nevertheless, led to a flood of concepts, categories and definitions, as researchers and practitioners alike scramble to analyse how a highly personalised, phenomenal resource such as knowledge can be managed using mostly traditional, rational tools and approaches. The sometimes desperate nature of this scramble has had dire consequences on how knowledge is perceived by individuals, and on the continuous search for the definite answer, of what knowledge is, an answer which in itself produces a perception of knowledge as something out there to be defined and categorised.

It will be suggested in this paper that knowledge development concepts are constructed socially by managers, based on their own past experiences. On a rhetorical plane these constructions exist as stories which are constantly reconstructed. Management gurus (see e.g. Huczynski, 1993) and scientists play their part in these processes. Managers are today capable of understanding and explicating their thoughts on knowledge as something other than abstract objects. When theory has to be put into practice, and knowledge development programmes have to be implemented in organisations, management’s actions are predominantly based on their modernistic worldview which stresses the importance of identifiable, expert knowledge, and thereby neglects the often overwhelming majority of other employees within the organisation.

As knowledge is the most important underlying phenomenon of interest for managers involved in knowledge development programmes in organisations, we will first of all establish a framework for the discussion on knowledge. Both knowledge and management are discussed as social constructions. After having presented the empirical study, we will outline how knowledge development is constructed by human resource managers. It will be argued that managers display a consciousness of knowledge as being complex and difficult to define and manage when they reflect on the phenomenon. When the time comes to develop knowledge in practice, we see that management acts within the framework of their existing understanding of reality.
Theoretical Background

In this section we will discuss knowledge as a process, as action, and contrast it with more traditional models on knowledge as abstract, decontextualised objects. Knowledge will be presented as personal and context-dependent, constructed in the social action and interaction of human beings. Social constructionism will then also be used to describe the management’s actions. Employing this perspective stimulates a search for an understanding of the framework within which the manager’s actions and interactions become meaningful.

Knowledge-as-Action

In this framework of knowledge-in-action, or knowing, we will attempt to formulate our thoughts on know-how, knowing, and the human understanding as important aspects concerning the phenomenon of knowledge.

**Know-what (Wissen)**

While Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) decided to view tacit and explicit knowledge as «mutually complementary entities» (p. 61), Polanyi’s original messier assumption was that all knowledge has tacit dimensions (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998:113). The two are very similar in structure, and neither can really be present without the other. He described «the «wissen» and «können» of the Germans, or the «knowing what» and the «knowing how» of Gilbert Ryle» (Polanyi, 1997:137) as two aspects of knowing, a concept which to his mind covers both theoretical and practical knowledge. The term explicit knowledge is often used as an equivalent to know-what. This might be somewhat misleading as explicit knowledge is perceived to be hard, systemic knowledge, the likes of which we would find in databases or documents. It can be spread without to much of a problem and reproduced in large numbers. Know-what could be considered as explicit knowledge inside an individual’s head. A telephone number can exist as explicit knowledge (maybe better referred to as information) in a telephone-book. I could also remember the telephone number by memorising it in my head. The text (the number) is in this case placed in a context (it is somehow meaningful for me to memorise it).

**Knowing**

If we employ a perspective where we view knowledge not as an object, existing independently of human beings, but rather as an action, than this compels us to recognise the existence of observers. I have to engage in some form of action in order for an observer to pass judgement on my knowledgeability. Knowledge is of someone about something. It is realistic to say that «knowledge is an assessment of an entity’s pattern of actions, made by an observer situated in a particular domain of action, drawing on a particular set of criteria» (Tsoukas, 1999). But this view of knowledge does not only apply when an observer passes judgement on someone else, but it also applies when the observer is passing judgement on himself. This is in line with the recipe of Weick (1995:61): «how can I know what I think until I see what I say?» I can only know that I know something after I have had the chance to observe and reflect on an action, albeit something I said or thought. A manager, for example, knows that his assistant is competent by looking at his work, but I also know that I can ice-skate by looking back at the past instances where I have ice-skated. In this case I reflect on my past experiences in order to pass judgement on myself.

The observer’s role becomes critical in this framework, because of the underlying paradigm or understanding he or she adheres to. This will very much determine what an entity knows or does not know. What tends to happen in our modern society today, for example, is
that knowledge in general is often defined as being represented by the knowledge that stands at the front of scientific research, especially within technology. Experts are perceived to be the ones in possession of this knowledge. That is why we would perceive a technology specialist as knowledgeable, while we would not observe a sales rep as being just that. Knowing «is not in any way a cognitive exercise, but primarily an empirical question to be settled in the context of action» (Tsoukas, 1999). In this way, organisational knowledge can be said to be observer-dependent and action-based. This makes it very difficult to fit it with an objective description in a way that a bank statement provides us with an objective description of the totality of our transactions during a month (Tsoukas, 1997). Thinking, especially reflecting, therefore can be seen as an important form of knowing.

Understanding

What is understanding? It is not easy to give a simple answer to the question. A fundamental aspect of the human understanding is that every individual creates and develops his or her own understanding. It is never presented to us on a silver plate. The creation processes are based on an individual’s past experience, especially the social interaction with other people (Sandberg & Targama, 1998:150). It fits in well with Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) sociology of knowledge. The most central point in their social constructionist view of reality are the processes through which individuals create meaning and an understanding for that which happens around them. Individuals are attributed with a need for establishing some sort of meaning for their existence, and therefore they prescribe meaning to events. The situation where events are interpreted in a similar way makes it possible for individuals to interact with one another – to live together. But even if the interpretation is achieved through other persons, the possibility for individuals to engage in novel interpretations exists. The patterns should therefore not be viewed as stable, and the variations that do exist between individuals should be rather seen as unproblematic. Human beings are constantly involved in a sensemaking that results in shared, social constructions of reality (Sandberg, 1999).

Another important aspect of understanding is that it gives rise to the meaning that a certain part of reality has for us. A persons understanding of his or her work includes the meaning that he or she attaches to that work (Sandberg & Targama, 1998:151).

The third central aspect concerning understanding is that it undergoes constant construction and reconstruction. According to Sandberg and Targama (1998:152), the development can take on two forms: a) a refinement and entrenchment of the existing understanding of reality, and b) a change in understanding, where the existing one is reconstructed to create a fundamentally different one.

Conclusion

It might be helpful to define knowledge as being tacit or explicit. Still, that does not solve our problem that we every time we conceptualise knowledge make it abstract and do not really catch its essence (Instead of referring to the nature of knowledge Husserl’s phenomenological science suggested the existence of an absolute essence of knowledge. It went as far as to suggest that only essences are knowable at all). By distinguishing between tacit and explicit knowledge we directly or indirectly strive towards fulfilling a declared aim of the modern sciences: the establishment of strictly detached, easy to identify, objective knowledge. On the one hand we have explicit knowledge, on the other hand we have tacit knowledge. The two can interact with one another, tacit knowledge can be transformed into explicit knowledge, etc. Sarcastically speaking, our aspiration towards establishing transparency in our complex world has received a boost. «But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge» (Polanyi, 1967).

The previous review of knowledge and learning has had the purpose of transcending the ‘ideal of modern science’. The ambition was to establish knowledge not as something that individuals, groups or organisations supposedly possess, but knowing as something that they
do. By focusing on knowing rather than knowledge, the traditional distinction that is assumed between knowledge (as some sort of object) and learning (as some sort of activity) is avoided. The dynamics of the social settings within which knowing is accomplished was also analysed. These settings were discussed as being socially constructed through the interaction between human beings, as opposed to the more traditional ideas put forward by proponents of the structural functionalist perspective, which focused on structures and functions as existing independently of human beings.

With the attention now focused on action and interaction, we move away from the idea of knowledge as a kind of economic asset or commodity, be it explicit, implicit or tacit, individual or collective. It was these «objectifications» (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:86) that allowed managers to attempt to manage knowledge. It seems hard, however, to believe that knowing can be managed based on our existing understanding of knowledge-as-object. We will now move on to discuss some contemporary approaches within management theory which are interrelated with the social constructionist perspective on knowledge.

Management as Social Construction

The traditional, rationalistic perspective on management has been dominating management theory throughout the last century. Within this perspective, the existence of an external reality is advocated. It is suggested that individuals can discover ‘true’ reality by studying and analysing it in a rational fashion. Not only an external reality is assumed to exist, the objectives of management are also portrayed as objectively given (Willmott, 1997:164). The methods and techniques that managers use in order to reach these given objectives are assumed to be unproblematic and their efficacy is seldom put in doubt.

The coherence of the traditional rationalistic perspective on managerial work has been contested on a number of accounts, March and Simon (1958), for example, have stressed the limitations of human information gathering, and Simon’s (1991) concept of «bounded rationality» is one attempt to highlight the idea that management does not have access to all the information there is, and that the information that is selected by management ultimately depends on and is guided by its particular allegiances, preoccupations and roles.

Even if the rationalistic perspective today still dominates management theory, a number of alternative approaches of treating the subject have begun to emerge. These are interrelated with the above discussion on knowledge as a social construction.

It is not easy to formulate new theories on management and leadership. One reason for this is that the traditional, heavily entrenched scientific constructions often have a tight grip on the understanding that people have, and consequently on the way that they approach the field of management (Sjöstrand & Tyrstrup, 1999:13). The last two decades have, however, witnessed the rise of a growing number of insights and reflections within the field in order to make it possible to reformulate some of the taken-for-granted assumptions on leadership and management.

Employing a perspective of management as social construction, we assume that every individual’s knowledge about reality is socially constructed. There is no reality that exists independent of human beings’ attempts of making sense of it. Social constructionism suggests that reality is created by us and other individuals based on our past experiences and our actions and interactions with other individuals. This means consequently that there is no external ‘true’ reality which has to be made apprehensible through the gathering of information. Individuals’ ambitions are rather to understand reality in a meaningful way. Managers, and all individuals in general, are therefore not passive creatures reacting to an external environment. They act and interact based on their understanding of reality.

The experience of insecurity and ambiguity constitutes a fundamental aspect of everyday life for managers. They continuously strive towards reducing this ambiguity and reaching explicit goals by employing the rational tools at their disposal. Managers have of course realised that they do not have access to complete information which would totally eliminate every form of ambiguity, that they very seldom understand their own preferences, that things
happen which they were not able to predict, that the information they gather, or are swamped with, is often extremely limiting, and that the settings in which they act and interact are highly complex. This results in the fact that the managers feel that they are dependent upon other individuals and their efforts. They are dependent on other individuals to translate their conceptualisations into practice in everyday life. These conceptualisations, in turn, make up a major part of the work practice of management.

Another important idiosyncrasy of management is the fact that it has the responsibility of creating, or at least influencing, the context within which organising will take place, a task which in the light of what was mentioned above, seems only unsatisfactorily accomplishable. At best their actions often facilitate a string of shared and organised activities. That these attempts to create a context within which organising can take place are largely in vain or fail completely, is illustrated only too clearly by the ever growing number of reorganisations that are sweeping the business world.

Having established that both knowledge and management need to be re-conceptualised and could be seen as social constructions, we can now move on to present the empirical study that this paper is based upon and, employing a social constructionist perspective analyse the material that was collected.

The Empirical Study

The empirical material which we used to analyse some of the problems that managers face when involving themselves in knowledge development and the management of knowledge in organisations was collected over a six month period in the middle of 1999. We chose 10 Swedish multinational companies, operating within vastly different business areas, among others pharmaceutical, truck manufacturing and hi-tech companies.

There were two major questions that guided us throughout our research effort: What is the status of knowledge development in Sweden? How is knowledge development socially constructed?

Our time and financial resources were relatively limited, which meant that the empirical material had to be collected in interviews, instead of employing a much more time consuming and ambitious ethnographic approach. The interviews were conducted with managers involved in some form of human resource function, such as Director Competence and Talent Management, Senior Vice President Organizational Development & Management Resources, Director Human Resources Sweden, etc.

The interviews were conducted in an open and unstructured manner, and in that way allowed the interviewees as much freedom as possible to provide us with stories and insights into their activities, their ways of making sense of the world, of socially constructing their world. We are aware of the fact that interviews are not situations in which individual behaviour can unfold naturally. Both the interviewer and the interviewee actively construct a reality which is appropriate to what they take to be self-evident about the person with whom they are conversing and the context of the talk. The researcher has to be aware of this in order not to fall into the trap of treating interviews as «straightforward reports on another reality» (Silverman, 1993:106).

This study, as we mentioned before, serves as a pilot study for a larger research project on knowledge development and learning in mergers and acquisitions. The ambition was to provide us with indications on how knowledge development is socially constructed by management, and on the difficulties that managers face when putting theory into practice.

Knowledge Development Between Theory and Practice
Management Learning

It is widely accepted today, at least on a theoretical level, that the conceptualisations of knowledge as abstract, disembodied, individual and formal are unrealistic. Furthermore, has learning always been treated by management and studied by researchers as a process contained in the mind of the learner. People involved within this field have continuously ignored the importance of the *life-world*, that famous philosophical concept put forward by Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century and later developed further by his student Martin Heidegger. This holds especially true when teaching professionals suggest that knowledge can be divorced from context and transferred as abstracted data or information, as is the case in traditional teacher-student situations. Sandberg and Targama (1998) discuss an interesting example in this respect, featuring engine optimisers at Volvo Car Corporation in Sweden. The primary task of these optimisers is to develop car engines for new car models. They do so by optimising different variables in the engine, such as fuel consumption, performance and emissions. Let us assume that the development within the working environment makes it necessary for the engine optimisers to learn something new about the engines they are working with. From a traditional rationalistic perspective on learning, these learning processes would be started up by having an ‘expert,’ a sort of trainer, identify the new knowledge that is needed, and having him or her explicate why it is needed. The next step would then involve somebody developing an educational activity that will as effectively as possible transfer the needed pieces of knowledge to the engine optimisers. The effect of such a development initiative would be that the optimisers would hopefully internalise the new pieces of knowledge and would maybe even use them in their daily work. But they would use this knowledge according to their old way of making sense of the world. Change would then have taken place on a [*rhetorical*](http://example.com) level, learning in practice will not have taken place.

It will be argued here that all the attention that knowledge, its development and management throughout the organisation, receives should be seen as social constructions emanating from the shared experiences that managers have in their everyday life. We have argued above that learning can take place in two ways: learning within one’s existing understanding of reality, and learning as a change in one’s existing understanding (Sandberg & Targama, 1998). The assumption here is that management itself is making sense of their *new* work activities, such as knowledge development, within the confines of their existing understanding of reality. They received the ‘new pieces of knowledge’ on how to implement knowledge development programmes, internalised the knowledge and hopefully use it in their everyday practice, but seem to make sense of this new knowledge on knowledge development according to their old way of making sense of the world. This could explain the traditional rationalistic ambitions to identify and objectify knowledge, facilitate a transfer of knowledge throughout the organisation, and the overriding desire to *manage* knowledge in general.

Keeping this in mind we will now first of all take a look at how management, and especially knowledge management, is constructed by managers on a theoretical or rhetorical level. It will become apparent that human resource managers involved with knowledge development are extremely capable of talking about the phenomenon of knowledge, and how it could be exploited. Problems arise, however, when we leave the rhetorical level and theory has to be put into practice.

Knowledge Development as Rhetoric

Sandberg and Targama (1998:109) argued that individuals always have a way of making sense of the world *before* they learn. What is learned is then interpreted based on this understanding of reality. Managers today have to make sense of the phenomena of learning...
and knowledge, and act accordingly. In this section we will elaborate on some the problems that are perceived as critical by managers within human resource functions, pertaining to knowledge development and learning. As knowledge management can be considered the most prominent «narrative» within human resources today, it is not surprising that it featured protuberantly in the empirical study.

**Knowledge Management**

Within the framework of knowledge management the management’s responsibility can be considered as being the integration of many different types of knowledge while at the same time maintaining the effectiveness which goes hand in hand with specialised knowledge development (Grant, 1998). This means that in order for managers to handle knowledge in an efficient way, they will have to be able to identify their employees’ strategically exploitable knowledge and understand how this knowledge should be spread within the company. This identification process once again is dependent on management’s ways of making sense of their reality.

According to Brown and Duguid (1998), most managers do understand the difficulties that can arise when knowledge has to be spread within an organisation. They, however, often reduce the problem to simply being a question of information. As a result of this, they see the solutions only in form of technical improvements in the information systems. Much hope and resources are invested into new database functions and intranets. As one interviewee put it:

«I believe that we have today created a lot of opportunities with help of IT. We have today a n array of databases which we have started to work with, which, of course, make the spreading and transferral of knowledge a lot easier.»

Even if it was largely perceived that knowledge management projects are not driven by technicians and systems developers, this might very well be so in practice. But knowledge and experiences cannot easily be formalised and structured according to the ways to which technicians and IT-specialists adhere to. Systems development is all about creating a standardised structure and search engines with which we can find our way in the labyrinth of information. Abstracting knowledge in a way which will make it fit into these structures «would turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies» (Polanyi, 1993:143). Many of the interviewees warned of the fallacy:

«I have seen a number of companies which have created very impressive knowledge management systems, but one has to be aware of not being blinded by all the flashing lights. The important thing is, what one uses the architecture for, what kinds of knowledge actually flow back and forth.»

In modern society «knowledge now tends to be understood as information, that is consisting of objectified, commodified, abstract, decontextualised representations» Tsoukas, 1997:827), and this becomes apparent in the perceived connection between knowledge management and information systems. This does not mean, as we have seen above, that managers believe that IT-systems can solve all their problems, but the belief that what is actually in the systems are knowledge and experiences, as supposed to decontextualised information, is deeply rooted. As one director for human resource development put it:

«Maybe we are on our way of becoming [a learning organisation], but there is still a lot to do. We have too few systems that can take care of all the experiences that are created. In this respect, we could become a lot better.»

**The Perceived Problems with Putting Theory into Practice**

After having discussed knowledge management as the most central concept which human resource managers perceive as being important within the framework of knowledge development, we will now in this section elaborate on some of the problems which human
resource managers were conscious of, relating to knowledge development and learning in organisations. Three concepts – employees’ understandings, leadership problems, and education contra learning- will be discussed in this respect.

**Employees’ Understandings**

Basically, it can be said that managers are conscious of the fact that knowledge is difficult to handle. A certain helplessness became apparent when it was understood that employees’ understandings had to be influenced:

«The technical things are today the ones that are easy to take advantage of with the tools at our disposal. The difficult part is project group, to initiate a knowledge management project and then, above all, to make people want to participate.»

«The net does its share, physical travels, meetings and the telephone, help in a way – there are many different ways. But I do believe that the inhibiting factor still is my own will to learn: that I allow myself to learn from others and don’t have to make the mistakes myself.»

The managers displayed a consciousness of the fact that structures and systems alone were only the first step in knowledge development. The difficult part was to make the employees understand the structures and systems in a meaningful way.

**Leadership Problems**

Many of the interviewees, although being themselves in a leading position, perceived leadership as a problem in the context of knowledge development. There were not enough leaders that could create the preconditions and contexts for learning to take place. Management was also seen as a major obstacle to learning, as one interviewee put it:

«Before management practices what it preaches, it will be difficult to make people understand around here.»

**Education Contra Learning**

We previously discussed the suggestion that learning processes can be both, explicit and implicit. Explicit learning occurs within the framework of activities that are explicitly identified as promoting learning (Sandberg & Targama, 1998:125), such as seminars or courses. Implicit learning occurs in everyday life. Learning here takes place without us really noticing that it takes place. Seminars, trainee-programmes, on-the-job training – the list of explicit learning constructed by the human resource managers is long. The value of implicit learning was not mentioned. As one manager put it:

«We are relatively fixated on competence development being the same as courses and seminars. We have to have a seminar! I don’t know what that depends on. It could be that we all have 12-15 years of schooling behind us. If one talks about competence development, people immediately assume that one has to get involved in some sort of classroom activity, a seminar or course.»

**Conclusion**

Language is often considered to be the primary medium of making sense of experience and explaining this to other individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Luckmann, 1975). We have above elaborated on some of the problems pertaining to knowledge development, which were constructed through the sensemaking processes of the human resource managers. They were perfectly capable to explicate and reflect on a rhetorical level on the phenomenon of knowledge, learning, and the problems that arise when one tries to exploit the employees’ knowledgeability. Let us now look at how management constructs knowledge development in practice.
Knowledge Development in Practice

In the last section, we have discussed some of the problems that managers find themselves faced with today when it comes to knowledge development and the management of knowledge in organisations. In this section we will now analyse how management constructs the solution to these problems in everyday practice.

**Job-rotation**

A recurring theme in many of the interviews was that human resource managers tried to employ different tools in order to motivate employees to move around within the organisation. They wanted to, on the one hand, help the employees to develop their knowledge and their network of contacts, on the other hand ensure a transfer of knowledge between different divisions within the organisation.

In one company, the human resource managers used systematic job-rotation in order to exploit the knowledge which was developed in one place by spreading it to another place, e.g., by transferring competent plant-managers to production-sites that were experiencing problems.

> We rotate a lot, between countries, between businesses, in order to transfer valuable competence. I believe that is the best way of spreading knowledge. Then we complement this with education.

Again knowledge is constructed as an object ‘possessed’ by individuals. By moving individuals, it is assumed that knowledge is also moved. Many theorists have, however, rejected the transfer models in which knowledge and learning is isolated from practice. Instead they «developed a view of learning as social construction, putting knowledge back into the contexts in which it has meaning» (Brown & Duguid, 1991:69).

**Mentor- and Trainee Programmes**

The interviewees perceived their mentor programmes as important features in the sharing of experiences in the organisations. These programmes, it was argued, give the senior members of the organisation the responsibility of helping the younger members to grow and develop their potential within the organising processes. This process was, however, not considered to be one–way only, as one employee explains:

> The mentor is a senior manager within the company, someone from the executive team. The mentor and the student meet each other and discuss with each other, and in that way knowledge is transferred between them, in both directions. The senior manager learns about what problems the junior manager far away out in the field has to face, what one talks about, and what one thinks and feels. The junior manager learns about visions, strategies and direction.

Mentor- and trainee-programmes are typical situations in which learning is explicitly presupposed to take place. Explicit learning, which we discussed above, is characterised by the fact that it unfolds within the framework of activities that are explicitly intended to promote learning. As far as it is possible, one tries to work with verbalised knowledge in the form of models, theses, concepts, as well as manuals and recommendations (Sandberg & Targama, 1998:125). These activities unfold in social settings that specifically exclude the complexities of practice and social interaction between practitioners. Considering the situatedness of knowing, it could be said that within these explicit social surroundings, the receiver of knowledge actually does not know, because the learning processes are abstracted from everyday work practice.

**Expert Knowledge and Centres of Excellence**
All the individuals we interviewed displayed a strong ambition to exploit and spread «especially valuable» knowledge and experiences which were developed and used by certain individuals, groups or divisions in different parts of the organising processes. Various methods were used often parallel, such as:

- Job-rotation involving individuals with special competencies
- Creating expert groups with specialists from different functions
- The creation of specialist groups, so called centres of excellence
- Best practice and benchmarking

All the interviewees considered themselves capable of identifying key individuals in the possession of invaluable knowledge which one wanted to exploit as best as possible. Everybody, from technical to economic specialists, to entrepreneurs were considered.

> «The individuals with key knowledge are easy to identify within our organisation. we call them knowledge specialists. They are specialists within certain areas.»

> «We now have a few expatriates which we send out, and administrate and use where they are needed most.»

But, as Alvesson (1993:1000) argues, «the notion of knowledge and knowledge-intensive as a base for identifying a group of workers or organizations (dominated by so-called knowledge workers) is thus not without serious problems. To define knowledge in a non-abstract and non-sweeping way seems to be extremely difficult. Knowledge easily becomes everything and nothing.»

Best practice and benchmarking are concepts which have over the past decades become very popular within the management world. Many of the interviewees considered both as ways of transferring knowledge from especially successful divisions to other areas within the organisation. Some perceived them primarily as measurement tools:

> «One project we have here is benchmarking. We try to measure statistically and publish numbers that are good or not so good.»

As the interest in knowledge grows, so does the interest in individuals that produce knowledge, sell knowledge, possess knowledge or generally lay claim to anything that is associated with knowledge. Consequently, knowledge is today often defined as being represented by the knowledge that stands at the front of scientific research, especially within technology. This makes it very hard to distinguish it from everyday, common sense knowledge, which in a way becomes identical with the elite knowledge (Freidson, 1984).

Employing IT and Internet

The construction of knowledge development being intimately related to systems development has been discussed above. As one interviewee put it:

> «One builds today with great speed the intranet-functions. That area is developing, and I am convinced that it is an insight into this thing called knowledge, which is the driving factor. One realises that one can become more effective, that one can save, both time and money with this.»

There were, of course, also those individuals which were more critical towards databases and how they are used.

> I believe, that there is a lot left to be done. There are so many databases and nobody really knows where they are. We have to have some form of structure.
Lotus Notes databases are easily accessible, but the volume is very high. People are not able, and cannot take advantage of everything they have access to. Every person, therefore, has to make a selection. It becomes important to help people to make that selection.

It can be argued, however, that knowledge development programmes in organisations are intimately connected and associated with information systems and the spreading of information. According to Tsoukas (1997), so much attention is focused on information, because its overabundance in late modern society brings with it a lot of temptations. «It tempts us into thinking that knowledge-as-information is objective and exists independently of human beings; that everything can be reduced to information; and that generating ever more amounts of information will increase the transparency of society and, thus, lead to the rational management of social problems» (Tsoukas, 1997:827).

Implications and Conclusions

We have seen that managers in charge of knowledge development activities construct knowledge as something highly complex on a theoretical level. Knowledge development is understood as being highly important, but problematic. This consciousness of knowledge and its development as being something else than the spreading of information via IT-systems is socially constructed by managers when they discuss and reflect on their thoughts and ideas. When knowledge development is implemented in practice it is, however, often reduced to simply being a problem of spreading information throughout the organisation by means of rational tools and methods.

As the study progressed, we were able to identify some of the constructions related to knowledge development, created by human resource managers in large, multinational Swedish organisations. On a theoretical level, these constructions are influenced by «management ideas» (Huczynski, 1993), and above all constantly constructed and reconstructed ‘narratives’ of the «knowledge society» (Stehr, 1994). They are constructed and constantly re-constructed as managers make sense of their reality. They are able to explain their situation, and thereby create meaning for themselves. Problems with making employees understand the knowledge development programmes, with leadership and with the focus on explicit learning in the form of seminars, courses, etc. were highlighted by the human resource managers. The problems arose, however, when theory had to be put into practice. Then it became apparent that they treated knowledge in practice according to their existing understanding of reality based on traditional rational management ideas.

As long as managers saw their responsibility as creating a reality for other individuals, their competence was judged based on their ability to establish concepts, routines, systems and structures, and successfully implement them in practice. Their objectives were portrayed as objectively given, and it was assumed that the creation of structures and systems would ensure that employees would work towards meeting the objectives.

To construct structures and systems has in the past, and will in the future constitute a large part of management’s work practice, but the construction process is only the first step in process of managing. What then needs to be done is to make people understand these structures and systems: what are they good for? How do they work? One should not forget, after all, that it is people in organisations that have to use the structures and systems in order to create an efficient business activity. So, to manage means in this respect to attempt to form individuals’ understanding of the business activity and the organisation (Sandberg & Targama, 1998:148).

This responsibility of managing should not be reduced to simply taking care of the problem of insufficient information. The forming of peoples’ understanding demands a lot more than making information available to everyone. As every individual creates his or her own understanding of reality, managers are not able to dictate how employees should understand their reality. They can, however, create the contexts within which other individuals will make sense of their work activities.
With respect to knowledge development in organisations, it becomes not only important for managers to realise that apart from supplying employees with computers, their understanding will also have to be influenced in order for them to understand the use of the computer in their daily activities as being meaningful. This realisation will above all have to be constructed as meaningful when theory is put into action.

References


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