

MOTIVATION FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT
– A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO DISPERSED, STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

How can MNCs achieve knowledge flows among members of strategic knowledge communities, where participation is not mandatory and individual motivation to contribute is low? This paper investigates globally dispersed knowledge sharing communities, which are strategically put in place by MNCs faced with the challenge of enhancing their knowledge management capabilities. More specifically, it explores the motivational aspects to knowledge sharing in these settings, and sheds light on the role of management and formal vs. informal organizational structures. Interview data from the members and managers of one knowledge community in a major multinational IT corporation underline the importance of appropriate incentive structures, particularly in the early phases of community life, where social integration is weak.

INTRODUCTION

I think it all comes down to “how can you create a culture that supports this” and “how can you motivate the individuals to live this culture and participate”? I think of the key things is that the community is not the end goal. The community just helps to achieve the end goal, which certainly is business results. (Official Lead)

Knowledge sharing across globally dispersed units has been identified as one of the main challenges of the network MNC. Many MNCs are struggling to improve their abilities to source from these “pockets of knowledge”, and then recombine and apply the knowledge in other locations, as they have realized that this leveraging capability is the basis of higher performance and a sustained competitive advantage (Barney 1991; Grant 1996; Kogut & Zander 1992). However, one needs to consider that the mere sharing of knowledge is probably not as beneficial as the availability of the right knowledge at the right time, and in the right location. This sets focus on the effectiveness of knowledge sharing and takes a dynamic view on knowledge flows (c.f. Ambos & Ambos 2007). In this light, MNCs need to ensure that knowledge is shared effectively throughout the whole organization (Gupta & Govindarajan 2000; Nohria & Ghoshal 1997). Research has shown that this can best happen through the use of informal or formal integrative mechanisms (Hansen & Lovas 2004; Kleinbaum & Tushman 2007). Bell and Zaheer (2007) postulate that internal networks facilitate knowledge sharing across the whole MNC.

In the past years, costs for information and communication technology have dramatically decreased, offering new opportunities to connect individuals (both formally and informally) who until then had to travel far to be able to link up. These increased lateral linkages within the overall networked MNC have made it possible for traditionally co-located groups or communities of practice to evolve into globally dispersed groups or knowledge networks (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright 2000; Tallman & Chacar 2008; Weisband 2008). They are a common and useful tool for companies seeking competitive advantage on the global level (Galbraith 2000; Govindarajan & Gupta 2001), and thus pose a possible solution to the

abovementioned challenge of knowledge sharing across distances in the MNC. It is without doubt that these knowledge communities must be shaped and cultivated to efficiently identify and use the relevant knowledge, meaning that their structure should be managed consciously (c.f. Kleinbaum & Tushman 2008). However, the nature of these communities is often semi-formal: While the structure itself is formal and well managed, the participation is oftentimes not, and the individual motivation to participate is low because of misaligned incentives.

Co-located knowledge communities can evolve naturally (Liedtka 1999) through informal and formal ties between members. These members can easily meet and interact, they share the same local demands, and can thus successively build up a common architectural knowledge based on their engagement in the same practice or sharing of the same interests (Tallman & Chacar 2008). On the other hand, when moving to a setting of globally dispersed actors (as is common in the contemporary MNC), these dispersed internal communities probably need tighter managerial control, as interaction becomes less natural across distances and some actors rarely or never have the possibility to meet in person (Maznevski & Chudoba 2000). As an example for the problems connected to dispersion, Kleinbaum et al. (2008) find that colleagues sharing the same business unit, job function and office location communicate approximately 1000 times more often than colleagues who share none of the above in common and are geographically separated. This means that the members have reduced possibilities to successfully build the relationships which are necessary for the development of a common architectural knowledge. For these reasons, globally dispersed knowledge sharing communities should be supported and managed more actively – however, oftentimes, they are not. This is a major pitfall that MNCs encounter when establishing knowledge sharing communities across dispersed units as part of their personalized knowledge management strategy. The problem is that the idea of members naturally developing common architectural knowledge and social relationships with each other, as is

happening in the co-located setting, does not necessarily hold true in dispersed settings. This raises several important questions for the MNC as a whole, as well as for the communities and the members working in them: *How can MNCs achieve knowledge flows among members of knowledge sharing communities, where participation is not mandatory and individual motivation to contribute is low? What is the members' motivation to sharing (or withholding) knowledge? And how can managers assure that knowledge is shared satisfyingly?*

In this paper, I aim to shed light on these questions by drawing on interview data collected at a major multinational computer technology corporation. This company put knowledge sharing communities in place as part of its global knowledge management strategy, and I examine one specific knowledge sharing community which is dispersed across Western Europe. The upper management strategically put this community into place in order to connect members fulfilling the same role in different subsidiaries and give them the opportunity to learn from each other.

This paper aims to make a contribution by showing how gaps between intended strategy, organizational structure, managerial action, and individual motivation hinder effective knowledge flows within knowledge sharing communities of the MNC, thus exploring one phenomenon on different levels. By this, I aim at investigating the difficult interaction between formal and informal structure, as they are not independent and may, only when managed well, be mutually supportive (Barnard 1938; Kleinbaum & Tushman 2007). Secondly, this paper contributes to the discussion on the right level of managerial involvement in the processes of communities of practice (Tallman & Chacar 2008; Thompson 2005). The third contribution of this paper lies in the perspective it offers, namely a strategic community view on dispersed knowledge sharing processes within the MNC. As Bell and Zaheer (2007) have pointed out, a deeper understanding is necessary of how knowledge flows within networks at different levels of analysis are affected by geography. Given that increasingly, the MNC's knowledge is shared within

globally dispersed group or community settings, we need to deepen our understanding on the dynamics on this particular level of analysis. This paper offers a step into this direction by focusing on internal knowledge sharing communities and on the individual motivations to participate in them.

The paper is structured as follows: First, I present the context of this case-based study. Second, I outline my research methodology and the rationale for the case study selection. Then, I analyze the knowledge sharing dynamics in the community, as well as the organizational and managerial problems connected to them. I anchor my results in the literature, and end with specific recommendations for managers of knowledge sharing communities who face similar challenges.

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN STRATEGIC COMMUNITIES

While the company under study put knowledge sharing communities in place as part of its global knowledge management strategy in different regions across the globe, one specific expert group dispersed across Western Europe formed the subject of my analysis. Referring to Yin (Yin 2003: 41), this case study represents a single case as the “representative or typical case”. This particular unit shows all characteristics of a typical, dispersed knowledge community during its early phase of existence, thus the lessons learned from this case are assumed to reveal some of the typical challenges and problems connected to it. Scholars have gradually taken up the idea that knowledge creation and dissemination in the MNC takes place in dispersed group structures or communities of practice (Lesser, Fontaine & Slusher 2000; Tallman & Chacar 2008). This insight particularly holds true for epistemically complex (tacit) component knowledge, which needs strong ties (Hansen 1999) and common architectural knowledge in order to be successfully transferred (Brown & Duguid 2001; Grandori 2001). While they

oftentimes span organizational boundaries, in many cases they do remain within the firm, and are strategically put into place by large corporations as part of their knowledge management strategies. Therefore, this community presents an ideal research setting to study the alignment of formal structure and informal interaction in communities (or, as Thompson (2005: 154) calls it, the “structural and epistemic components”), because on the one hand, the structure has been put in place by upper management, but on the other hand, this same management wants the community to be self-sustaining.

RESEARCH SETTING

The company in which I conducted my study is a US-based multinational IT corporation that develops, manufactures, licenses, and supports a wide range of software products. The company employs more than 90,000 people, of which roughly 40% are employed outside the US. The 13 members of the community under study were formal members of the Western European regional team of software developers, whose overall mission was to secure platform adoption across the region. The members’ jobs in their local subsidiaries were to support marketing and sales by offering a technical perspective, e.g. by talking about different ways to design applications and solutions for their customers, how to integrate new technologies with already existing software architecture, or by demonstrating the company’s new technologies by engaging with senior technical decision makers at both customers and partners. In addition to this, their job also involved a more indirect way of attaining these goals by speaking to a technical audience at national and international conferences. According to a job offer for

this position, the required skill set consisted of superior communication skills, strategic thinking in combination with good tactical skills, organizational dynamics, and excellent technological expertise.

Members of the community were distributed across the company's smaller national subsidiaries in Western Europe (WE): Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Although two members came from Italy, they were not based in the same city, meaning that all individuals were in a distant location with no other member at the same site. All of the members were male, and held the nationality of the country they were working in. In their job role, they were the only ones in their respective subsidiaries. The countries all had the same level of importance to the overall region. The membership of this community was restricted to the individuals carrying out the role described above and only in the WE region, thus the community had a formal side to it with regards to membership. Other Western European Countries such as Germany, UK and France were not part of this WE community because of their market and subsidiary size, although the practices were the same as in the countries under study. Interaction among members of the WE community and the larger markets did not take place on an official basis, as the market size led to too many differences in relevant knowledge. In these larger markets, more than one person fulfilled the role, offering these individuals the possibility and benefit to exchange knowledge with each other on a country level. Because the smaller subsidiaries in my sample did not have this option, the Official Lead created this specific community in order to facilitate the exchange and development of knowledge, sharing of resources and creation of best practices.

At the time of first creation several years ago, the organization was still in a different regional structure, meaning that the community at that time existed of members of the EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) region. The organization was however restructured in July 2008, and the EMEA community was split up: Some of the members remained in the new WE community, whereas others

left, e.g. to become part of a new Eastern European community. One of the members of the old EMEA community was given the role of the Lead of the new WE community, and the Official Lead asked him to (re-)launch this new community during the summer of 2008. Several new members joined during that time, either because their subsidiaries had so far not had this particular function in their organizations, or because of normal job fluctuation. In total, 6 members already had been part of the community in the old EMEA structure, while 7 others joined only during the re-launch.

METHODOLOGY

I used semi-structured interviews (Merton, Fiske & Kendall 1990), using a interview guideline to structure the interview. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights by observing how the members experienced the community dynamics, hearing their thoughts on why they chose to share knowledge with the others or why not, and whether the organization provided useful support for the community's activities. The interviews took place in April and May 2009 (see project timeline in Figure 1). In total, 12 individuals were interviewed – 11 (out of 13) members of the community under study, including its informal manager (named "Lead" from now on), as well as the official Western European (WE) manager ("Official Lead" from now on). Table 1 summarizes information on the community members. The interview guideline, which was sent out approximately three days before the scheduled interview to allow preparation, was largely based on the questions developed in the community assessment tool by Verburg and Andriessen (2006), and can be found in the appendix. However, after the first three interviews, it became apparent that the guideline was hindering the members to speak freely, thus a more informal approach to the interview was adopted, letting the interview partners talk

about those issues that were most important to them. Interestingly, it always boiled down to the points essentially of interest to this study.

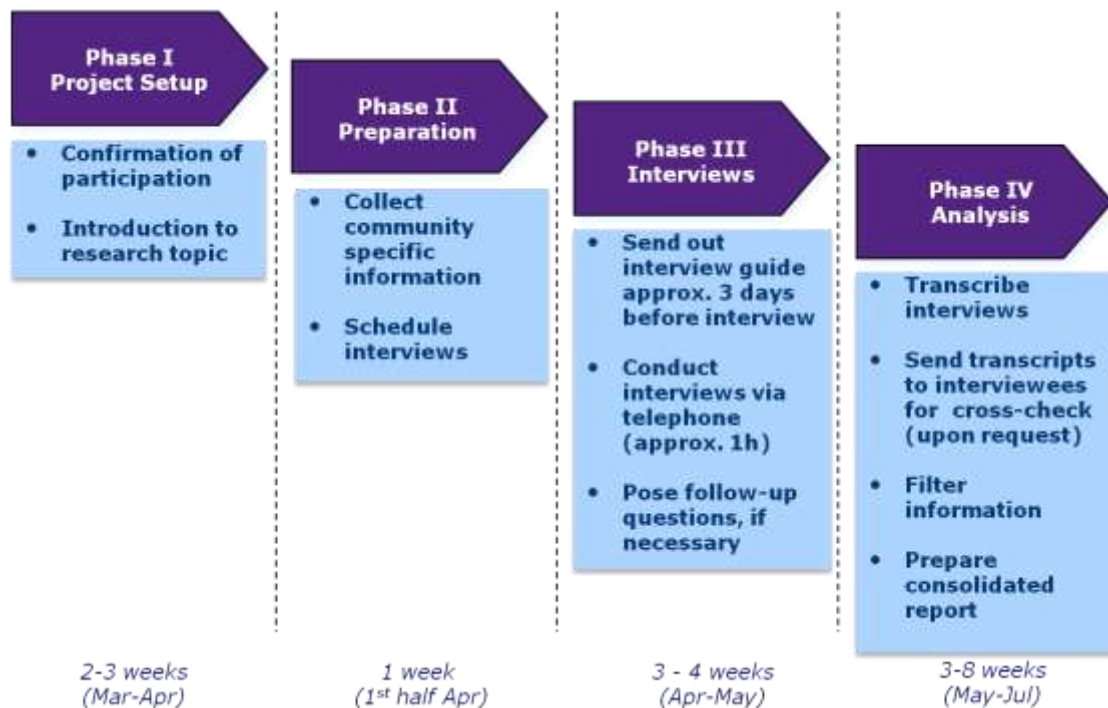


Figure 1: Project Timeline

All interviews were conducted over telephone, except for the one with the informal manager of the community, which was conducted face-to-face during a site visit. All interviews were recorded after having asked for permission, and later were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent back to the interviewees to allow for cross-checks; however none of the interviewees requested any changes to the written interview documents. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

Country Location	Tenure since before	
	(old) / after (new)	
	the re-launch	
Austria	Old	
Belgium	New	
Denmark	Old	
Finland	Old	
Ireland	New	Not interviewed
Italy	Old	
Italy	Old	
Netherlands	New	
Norway	New	
Portugal	New	
Spain	New	
Sweden	New	Not interviewed
Switzerland	Old	
Official Lead	Old	

Table 1: Information on Community Members.

ANALYSIS

Main Problems of the Community

The request to conduct interviews with the community members found great support in the organization, as all members and both the Lead and the Official Lead perceived the community to be in need of external support, and were looking for an opportunity to get more drive back into the community. The new WE community had been launched in virtual kickoff meeting in September 2008. During this initial conference call and in personal, 1:1 follow-up phone discussions, the Lead asked each member about his expectations towards this community. In these calls, all of the members emphasized their willingness to participate in the community's activities. Yet, when the Lead tried to set up a virtual conference in April 2009, he did not receive enough positive replies to his request for date suggestions. The idea behind having this summit was mainly to discuss specifics on the job role, in order to be able to share this feedback with the higher levels of the organization, so that it could be included into planning activities for the next fiscal year (starting in July 2009). Specifically, commitments towards the community and role guides would have made sense to be discussed, before the company could come up with their own ideas of what would be best for the community. Therefore, after half a year of existence, the Lead realized:

Some parts of our community worked very well, such as the demand-driven approach for resource and knowledge exchange (e.g. via live meetings around specific subtopics), whereas others had not really taken off (e.g. virtual summits, intranet portal). (Lead)

As the Lead was himself owner of the same role as the other members, he was very busy with driving the local activities as his primary task. This meant that he, as the others, felt quite alone in his role in the local subsidiary and would therefore have liked to discuss things with the other members of the

community. Unfortunately, travel restrictions did not allow the community members to meet in person, therefore the virtual summit was seen as his attempt to deal with the current situation and nevertheless have the possibility of driving discussions, exchanging experience and collecting feedback to be shared with the area and the company. In an email communication introducing this research project to the community members, the Lead expressed:

This [project] is a big chance to better understand what every single one's expectation is and what the value of acting as an international team instead of just fighting as individuals really is. [...] I would really like to understand the original source for these kinds of problems in terms of taking up with the community efforts. (Lead)

Table 2 provides an overview of the main issues discussed in the interviews.

Topic	Ideal Situation	Reality	Barrier
Communication	Face-to-face	Virtual	T&E cuts, geographic distance
Personal relationships	Everyone knows everyone	Old vs. new members, those who have met face-to-face vs. those who haven't	T&E cuts, lack of trust in new members
Knowledge Sharing	Personal, codified where applicable	Unclear, neither personal nor codified	Unclear knowledge mgt. strategy
Participation	Formal commitments + intrinsic motivation	Informal goals, no motivation	Unclear role in the organization, lack of integration

Table 2: Main topics discussed in the interviews.

Codification vs. Personalization Approaches to Knowledge Sharing

It's not just about having a shared point site and the presentations you do. There should be a drive within the people to really share their ideas and their problems. And I see that some of these steps are taken already. But it's personalizing, getting to know each other, which is important. (New Community Member, Netherlands)

One area the Lead was particularly disappointed with was the effort to create an intranet portal for the community on which documents and experiences could be shared. This portal seemed not to take off, and members were reluctant to share knowledge with their colleagues on this portal. As it had been created based on the feedback from the calls in September, his dissatisfaction seemed reasonable. Several interviewees mentioned that sharing documents online was seen as extra work, mainly because the members were unsure whether the shared document would actually be applicable to the others' specific local environments. Thus, in order for them to be able to use it in their context, they would need further explanations of the document in order to be able to adapt it to their needs.

If you put something in there, nobody will use it. So why would you put it there? Or, if they use it, you will have to explain... have to put some energy and time in explaining what you try to achieve and what you mean with certain things. You know that at the very moment you put something there, either no one will read it or you will have to put energy and time in explaining a couple of times what you meant with that document. And then, if you're not sure that you will get something out of there, then why would you put effort in it? It's hard to put a document that is self-explaining and everybody understands without any additional effort afterwards to explain it. Maybe also... what's for me sometimes a little bit why I will be... not so much motivated to put documents in there... is that... you have the impression that your situation might be different than the others, and it might not be that useful for the other people. That's also if you don't know the people that well, that you don't maybe see the... communality in there... and you tend to think that this is very specific to your own situation. And if you put a document on a share somewhere, that people won't understand it, might not think it's very useful, or even not very good... (New Community Member, Belgium)

As Hansen and colleagues (Hansen, Nohria & Tierney 1999) point out, companies should either emphasize a codification or a personalization strategy for managing their knowledge. It seems as though the efforts to creating explicit knowledge and storing it in such a portal ran counter to the previous effects of bringing the members together on a personal level.

I guess that people don't know each other, they don't really trust each other, and they don't see how these people could efficiently help them. I guess that they say "well OK, I won't try to use this community, because probably I will lose more time than I will win with this community". See, why would I put my stuff into this portal that [the Lead] set up. But I think that people don't really... If you don't really see what's in it for you, then you don't do that. And I think in their mind it's like "Well, I put my documents there, but what's in it for me – probably I won't get good information back." And if I put information in there, probably it will cost me more time, it will cost me time to explain what the document really means, what the context is. So it will cost me time only to put my document in there, and maybe no one else will put documents in there, so I won't get any benefits out of there. So I guess that's one of the main reasons why it won't fly, that people don't see how it would benefit them. (New Community Member, Belgium)

The Importance of Personal Relationships

Knowledge needs a common ground of understanding, so that all parties involved in the knowledge sharing process can extract whatever is useful (c.f. Ambos & Ambos 2009). When moving to a dispersed setting, however, the contextual knowledge of other sites is reduced. Information and communication technologies can unfortunately not prevent breakdowns in the transfer of knowledge across distributed sites (e.g. Chudoba, Wynn, Lu & Watson-Manheim 2005; Cramton 2001). This increases the coordination complexity, thus requiring not only shared goals, which can be achieved through alignment of formal structures and incentives, but also shared knowledge and mutual respect (Gittell 2005). For this reason, human-related factors such as trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999) and interpersonal ties (Ahuja & Galvin 2003; Kanawattanachai & Yoo 2002) have been considered as facilitators of knowledge transfer across dispersed actors. Several researchers have shown that social integration (Maloney & Zellmer-Bruhn

2006; Rico, Molleman, Sánchez-Manzanares & Van der Vegt 2007) has a positive effect on team performance, and is likely to facilitate knowledge flows through an increased shared understanding (Cramton 2001) and a higher willingness to share knowledge.

So in the old community it was really, after meeting people face-to-face it was so much easier to engage online than it was before we met, because you had the feeling of how this would be interpreted when you sent some sort of broadcasting message. And that's kind of nice, that you know how this would be... what kind of picture this would put in the heads of the receivers in the community.
(Old Community Member, Denmark)

In line with Doz and Santos (1997), knowledge transfers become “eventful” in dispersed and differentiated settings (as opposed to settings of co-location and co-setting), and it thus seems reasonable to deepen our understanding on knowledge sharing processes in these dispersed knowledge communities. However, although previous research has shown that collocation facilitates knowledge flows and that occasional face-to-face meetings positively affect the social integration of team members (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999; Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen 2007), many members of globally dispersed communities rarely or never have the possibility to meet in person. This makes the development of shared understanding and social relationships particularly challenging, and possibly decreases the willingness to share knowledge. At the time of the interviews, all of the activities were undertaken virtually because of restrictions in travel budgets due to the general economic situation in 2008/2009. This meant that members maintained communication via mailing lists, emails, telephone, or (video) conferencing technologies. Although face-to-face contact was seen as key, the technology closest to this (offering almost the same communication cues), video conferencing, was not often used. Almost all of the members mentioned the inability to meet physically as one of the major inhibitors of building relationships, and one interviewee made it very explicit:

I really have a much stronger relationship with the people I know face-to-face than the people I haven't met. If there's one thing that you can take away from this, this should be it. (Old Community Member, Denmark)

Having good personal relationship to the others was seen highly important because of different reasons: the ability to trust, understanding the broader context, or understanding communication styles.

Having a strong personal relationship was perceived to also help with identity – the members who did know others face-to-face knew who they were communicating with.

You have business and personal trust. If you are to do a business task, you only need business trust, and you will do it to reach your goals. If you are in a community, thinking of a community being some brainstorming, engagement to create new ideas, you need more time than on the business level – you need personal trust, because you are committed at a personal level with the other members of the community. If this is business as usual, I don't need to be involved, because I am business involved. If you have a community that wants to be at the true sense of a community, that there's some part of an interest and unselfish thing, you must have some kind of personal trust. (New Community Member, Portugal)

Motivation for Knowledge Sharing and Incentives

First, when you are new, you want to share experiences and want to improve your experiences. Let's say you want to create some kind of project or scenario, these are your peers, and these are the people who can help you, can discuss, or can understand your role better. So they can give good criticism or good suggestions to your solution. So this is a question of giving and sharing, and sharing the project and the experience. The second one is to get feedback from them to improve; they can help you improve your solution. With giving these two things, and if you do these two things correctly, you get a free item for bonus: It's that you improve your organization. So, you don't have to work on the third one, because the first two will improve the organization by itself, because by sharing best practices, by sharing what's going wrong, or your approach to market. Of course we have very different markets here. So what goes very well in Norway is not the same thing that runs very well in Portugal, Austria or Italy, or Spain. It's always a matter of knowing your local market and what runs well in your country. (New Community Member, Portugal)

While shared goals may enhance the coordination within the community, too much emphasis on goal setting may erode the foundation of cooperation that holds groups together (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky & Bazerman 2009). Similarly, it may decrease extra-role behavior, such as helping co-workers (Wright, George, Farnsworth & McMahan 1993), and as Mitchell and Silver (1990) state, goals may promote competition rather than cooperation and ultimately lower overall performance. Therefore, while some formality seems necessary to ensure regular interaction, the participation in the knowledge sharing processes should ideally be driven by intrinsic motivation, rather than formal goals.

So it might help to have a more active role. But if the people really don't react, don't react... then even if you spend 3 days a week to make it work... if the people don't see the benefits... I guess that's one of the main things he should do... try to make it clear that there are benefits. There's no use to try to make a community live if people see that there might be a potential benefit. So [the Lead] might put all the time, be full-time busy with this, if the people don't see the benefit it won't fly. So we might just try to start with the people that are interested, and hope that the others will jump on the train once they see it's working. (New Community Member, Belgium)

In other words, when knowledge sharing cannot be overseen by management because of the lack of formal mechanisms, it is up to the individual members to decide on their participation.

I know my role for 5 years, [...] so I should be the first to participate and to make this community living. But I have zero benefits, and there is zero management attention to this community. It should be the attention to my manager here, attention to the management in WE. And then, yes, then you start to see the benefits, you think the balance is there, and suddenly, in this priority list – and that's the trick in this game – it goes one step higher, one step higher, and then suddenly it's there. [...] I would probably have it at position 100. It has no impact on me. And if everybody thinks like me, it's a disaster, right? Because nobody is participating, everybody's hoping that something is happening – but nothing is happening. (Old Community Member, Switzerland)

This leads us to motivational aspects and appropriate incentive mechanisms. Wageman (1995) has shown that the choice of incentives impact the ability of teams to work together effectively. Almost all

interviews talked about formal commitments at one point in time, and whether or not they would encourage the participation in the community activities. Views were very different on this topic, but all interviewees seemed to believe that the incentive system in place was not supporting them in their activities for the community.

I think once you really have to oblige the people to participate, you've lost already. It's very easy to act as if you are participating in c, so that you get your commitments, but don't put any effort in it. (New Community Member, Belgium)

The interviewee from Portugal had a slightly different opinion, and emphasized the dynamics over time:

And you wouldn't want this? Being business-driven, being taking into the organization structure? I'm just saying that if you call it community, it's different from calling it business unit. But if this community works so well, you are creating a business unit that runs for itself in the end. That's only a matter of time. Because we are all fully comfortable if you call it business unit. It's just a question of what are your goal, and how do you want people to commit to the goals? ***Personally, is that something you wouldn't mind happening?*** Being an informal guy, I don't care. Being with all this approach that we have to things, I don't really care about it. I'm more focusing on the goals that we are trying to achieve. It's a matter of expectations. Because if you call it community, I'm a volunteer, if you call it business, I must do it. And I will do it anyway, that's not a problem. The expectation is everything in this. ***Concretely, if there were personal commitments drawn towards the participation in this community?*** It depends. You have a moment for everything. You have moment for engage the community, and you have a moment to commit to the community. When you start engaging, you don't think about tasks and goals; you think about and discuss ideas. And after that you have a moment of commitments, where you are going to deliver those commitments, these goals, tasks and subjects. In that moment, you can have written commitments. But that's the second part of the things, because people accept the tasks, and they understand that they must do things. And it's a matter of measuring and controlling themselves. It's only a way of getting goals. It's only ... the right way to do things. You must formalize things, so you have commitments with the rest of the team. (New Community Member, Portugal)

However, as Stonich (1981) has pointed out some time ago in his study on measurement and reward systems to encourage future-oriented behavior, managers show a tendency to focus almost exclusively on short-term events and financial objectives, making it particularly difficult to get sincere strategic

thinking, planning and action (similarly Hoskisson & Hitt 1988). Nevertheless, knowledge sharing does need some future orientation, because the value may not be instantly visible. It is therefore important that incentives are set which take care of this long-term objective.

Well, I think it's a question of motivation. If you do business, you have one motivation to do it: Because you must do it, you are paid for it. If you have a community, you are not paid to do things, and you do it because you like, and in the end it will improve your business. This kind of community, because it is inside your business, so it's not ... a fair community... or ... it's difficult to call it a true community because you have a lot of business-related things that are taking the ... philanthropic way of looking at a community. In the end, if you try to push people, they will not do it because they really want it, but because they look at it as a business game, or a kind of personal, interpersonal game, a business-related way of showing themselves. (New Community Member, Portugal)

In the interview with the Official Lead, the aspect of formal commitments was also discussed. His suggestion was not to put these commitments on the members (so as not to distract them from having natural interactions), but on their managers (in their local subsidiaries).

On the one side, we need to create an environment that allows people to spend time of community's activities, so that's why we're basically thinking that it would be more appropriate to put a commitment into the manager's goal... you know, that the managers should have a commitment on community fostering activities. So basically that they can spend time, share resources, and not as part of the individual itself. So that's kind of the current thinking we have.

At the end it's your mgr who tells you whether you did a good or a bad job. I have some influence, my mgr has some influence on this, and we certainly can raise issues, and we can celebrate success. However, the local aspect is tremendously important, so we need to ensure that we can foster some of that thinking into the local plants and into the local ways that success is defined.

I want to have a self-sustaining community which defines the rules of engagement themselves. And that's why we can't have individual commitments on that. So we need to put this on a higher level, and measure the outcome of the community. So the things we really want to drive... the community is kind of a tactic to achieve certain outcomes. And we should measure the outcome, and by measuring the outcome, we get a feeling of whether we have an environment in place that creates efficient community. (Official Lead)

Organizational Role of the Knowledge Community

Generally, it became clear in the interviews that many of the members were not sure about the real value of the community. In the interview with the Official Lead, it became clear that one main driver behind the creation of this community was the maintenance of consistency across national markets.

And consistency is, from my perspective, actually one of the most important things. So from an area, if we can think about the 12 subsidiaries I'm accountable for... we can achieve our numbers, basically, if there are 2 subs overperforming, and 10 are actually in red. But that would be really bad, so my goodwill is to have a consistent green across the different subs, and that requires consistent execution and role excellence across the board. So that's why the community is crucial to me. Because the manager of each of the members, he basically has many other roles that he needs to guide as well. So he needs to have strong role guidance from the area. (Official Lead)

This was also obvious to one interviewee:

And it's a tool for regional management to achieve consistency across national subs in how this (job) is conducted in the countries and so on. So it has a strong strategic touch to it, and I wonder if this is so important, why not formalize it more, and take away the voluntary participation which isn't really voluntary anyways.

Managerial Aspects

If you are forced to share knowledge, it might be less attractive to do it, you might have competition...
(New Community Member, Portugal)

Although communities may evolve naturally, they sometimes need managerial intervention to integrate them into the organization (Thompson 2005; Wenger & Snyder 2000).

One thing that affects communities is their leadership style. Or at the beginning.... Is the kind of sound that you use. If you have a democratic style, let's say that you want 100% of the members to agree on something, you are going to wait for a long time. But if you say "Ok, I think we have at least some kind of agreement of people that think this is the right way, and the others don't", say "No, we shall do it". And the style of the leadership, being more preemptive, more directional and less democratic, in some moments of the community is very important. When you are starting community it's very important. Because you show a way, you have a vision, and you drive that vision. At moments of creation of

community, pushing the community on certain moments, it's very dangerous. Because if you wait for 100% of the people to be with you, you will never start moving. (New Community Member, Portugal)

Management of globally dispersed group settings is a particular challenge, as leaders have to exercise control without seeing or directly experiencing the subordinates (Hertel, Geister & Konradt 2005). Since interaction becomes less natural across distances, research on communities of practice has examined whether these knowledge networks can purposefully be created (Saint-Onge & Wallace 2003; Thompson 2005; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), especially because some actors rarely or never have the possibility to meet in person (Maznevski & Chudoba 2000).

I think it's like business. If you have a good idea, money will appear. If you take that to the community level: If you have a good value, people will appear and will want to be on this community. So it's always a matter of initiative. I like to have a community that do a lot of things, but I'm not the guy to create new things, but if they appear I will join. This is the kind of thing that you see of being the followers. I don't believe that you have a leader and followers. I believe that you have leaders on many things and followers on many things. So if you lead on one activity, you are following another activity, because you cannot be the superman of all communities. Or else the community will break, because a community cannot be dependent on one guy, they are dependent on themselves, on each other. So everyone must appear. You must have some empowerment, all empowerment in the community members to create activities. That's the only way to survive. If you put everything on top of one guy, it will be dependent, and it's almost like a one-man show. (New Community Member, Portugal)

As stated above, dispersed communities only have reduced possibilities to successfully build relationships and common architectural knowledge. Based on this, managers in these globally dispersed settings should actively encourage interaction among the members and enforce meetings. However, as mentioned above, cuts in travel budgets made it impossible for the community to set up a face-to-face meeting. The Official Lead was not happy about this:

When you look at this from a very strategic perspective, of course it does not make much sense to save there. However when you look at a company which is traded on the stock exchange, you need to show

the numbers on a 3-months rhythm, so that's not very strategic at all! It's a pity. And the interesting bit is that really people believe you go virtual now, and that virtual teams can solve the problems, but actually it's not so easy! (Official Lead)

Though interaction and personal meetings, members can form social relationships (Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1999; Joshi, Lazarova & Liao 2009; Malhotra et al. 2007) with each other, or build up common architectural knowledge, both of which serve as a prerequisite for successful knowledge sharing. In the interviews, it became clear that this is particularly important and needs managerial support at early stages of a community's existence.

I don't think the Lead has to push a lot of information towards us. Where he can help, and that's I think more the role of a community Lead, is bringing people together – not content, but people. Because then connections will be made, and the more I think about it, it's a fussy process. You can't predict whether the connections are made. So I think a Lead is necessary to give the community a name, or to make sure that the people understand that there is a community, to give it a face. But I don't think it's wise to have a Lead and rely on them to generate all the content or all the energy. So the energy should come out of the group, and they can leverage that by bringing people together. And I think that's one of the laws.' (New Community Member, Netherlands)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What I see as the role of Lead is to make sparks – get a fire started. They deliver all the fuel once it's started. What he can control is that he can bring people together, and show that there is communality between the people. He can generate some sparks or generate some energy – but if nobody picks it up, it's not a community. If he has to force people to be part of it, it's not a community. And that's the difficulty, and my belief is that it will help if we get to know each other better. (New Community Member, Netherlands)

In light of the persistent need to further our understanding on knowledge flows within MNCs, this paper presents an in-depth case study on the role and challenges of dispersed knowledge sharing

communities, and on the motivational aspects of their members. Research has found that much knowledge flows through semi-formal or informal networks, in which members are often separated by culture and space. What has been less clear is how MNCs can achieve beneficial knowledge flows among members of knowledge sharing communities, where participation is not mandatory and individual motivation to contribute is low, and how managers can assure that knowledge is shared effectively. By shifting the focus of further research endeavors on communities (as done in this paper), we may gain a more thorough understanding on what ultimately drives knowledge sharing performance in the MNC. In this respect, this paper follows a recent call by Foss (2008) and others to tackle the micro-foundations of knowledge management. Lastly, the importance of a fit between the formal and informal structure has been pointed out, and thus this paper emphasizes the growing relevance of research on informal structure (Galbraith 1973; Galbraith 1994, 2006; Kleinbaum & Tushman 2007). Thus, we show that knowledge will only be shared effectively, when the personal relationships as well as the formal structures and incentive systems are aligned. I believe that my study reveals some interesting findings, both for scholars and practitioners. However, using a single case study may limit the generalizability of my findings to other settings. Despite the specific context of one knowledge community in one major computer technology MNC, I believe that this evidence reflects the dynamics of many other knowledge communities, strategically enforced, but inadequately managed.

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