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KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AT THE MEETING POINT OF CULTURES – DETERMINANTS AND FACTORS

Summary. A starting point for discussing the subject matter raised in the article is presentation of a model of perspective of the knowledge transfer process. The main part of the study has been devoted to discussion of determinations of the effectiveness of knowledge transfer process, with particular focus on the issues of knowledge transfer at the meeting point of cultures. The presented and characterized factors are considered important in the context of quality and effectiveness of knowledge transfer. The whole of deliberations are summarized with formulation of factors of knowledge transfer at the meeting point of cultures.

Keywords: knowledge, transfer, cultural diversity

TRANSFER WIEDZY NA STYKU KULTUR – UWARUNKOWANIA I PRZESŁANKI

Streszczenie. Punktem wyjścia do omówienia podjętej w artykule problematyki uczyniono przedstawienie modelowego ujęcia procesu transferu wiedzy. Zasadniczą część opracowania poświęcono została omówieniu uwarunkowań skuteczności procesu transferu wiedzy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem kwestii transferu wiedzy na styku kultur. Wskazano i scharakteryzowano czynniki uznawane za istotne w kontekście jakości i skuteczności transferu wiedzy. Podsumowaniem całości przeprowadzonych rozważań jest sformułowanie przesłanek transferu wiedzy na styku kultur.

Słowa kluczowe: wiedza, transfer, zróżnicowanie kulturowe

1. Introduction

Among all processes related to knowledge – the knowledge transfer process is perceived as one of the most fundamental (key)¹. Knowledge transfer is regarded as the essence of creation of new knowledge and maximization of its value². Inseparable processes connected with the transfer process are the processes of knowledge capture, storage, dissemination, appropriation, application and generation³. Practical examination of the transfer knowledge process is extremely costly due to the level of its complex and time-consuming character⁴, and in the case of transfer implemented at the meeting point of cultures, to a greater degree than with regard to transfer within one culture⁵. It is due mainly to the fact that a considerable part of knowledge transferred between or within multinational corporations (MNCs) is highly context-sensitive and tacit in nature⁶. Intercultural cooperation – in particular within intercultural teams – is one of the basic challenges to be faced by contemporary organizations⁷. Cultural distance, regardless of potential opportunities and benefits (which it may be a source of) is a tremendous challenge for people involved in it. Usually, the greater the cultural distance, the smaller the degree of mutual understanding between co-workers and the more difficult the agreement with partners⁸. And the more, in the opinion of people cooperating with each other, the misunderstandings, mistakes, omissions, shortcomings, negligence and communication errors (resulting from ignoring or disregarding cultural differences), usually, the more the disappointments, the worse the climate of cooperation and usually, the lower the degree of mutual trust, which affects efficiency and effectiveness of

¹ Kumar J.A., Ganesh L.S.: Research on knowledge transfer in organizations: a morphology. “Journal of Knowledge Management”, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2009, p. 161.

² Kang J., Rhee M., Kang Ki. H.: Revisiting knowledge transfer: Effects of knowledge characteristics on organizational effort for knowledge transfer. „Expert Systems with Applications”, Vol. 37, No. 12, 2010, p. 2.

³ Desmarais L., Parent R., Leclerc L., Raymond L.: Knowledge transfer between two geographically distant action research teams. “Journal of Workplace Learning”, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2009, p. 219.

⁴ Szulanski G.: The Process of Knowledge Transfer: A Diachronic Analysis of Stickiness. „Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes”, Vol. 82, No. 1, 2000, p. 10.

⁵ Qin C., Ramburuth P., Wang Y.: Cultural distance and subsidiary roles in knowledge transfer in MNCs in China. “Chinese Management Studies”, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2008, p. 260-261.

⁶ Reiche S., Kreimer M., Harzing A.: Inpatriates as Agents of Cross-Unit Knowledge Flows in Multinational Corporations, [in:] Sparrow P.R. (ed.): Handbook of International Human Resource Management. Wiley, Ltd., Great Britain 2009, p. 152.

⁷ Increase in cultural diversity of staff is affected both by intensification of competitive fight, the scale of the phenomenon of contemporary migration for economic purposes, liquidity of organization's demand for a certain type of employee skills (with regard to the type of these skills and the period of their use) and the scope and dynamics of demographic transformations of the world populations.

⁸ Wiessman R.L.: Intercultural communication theory, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks-London-New Delhi 1995, p. 118-220.

communication and cooperation⁹. As M.M. Ajmal, T. Kekäle and J. Takala state¹⁰, eighty percent of knowledge management applies to people and culture, and only twenty percent to technology. In connection with the above, it is not surprising that ability to handle cultural diversity presently seems to constitute one of the most important factors determining success or failure of the organization¹¹. Therefore, from the point of view of both theory and practice, the analysis of determinations of knowledge transfer in culturally diverse environment seems extremely interesting.

2. Knowledge transfer – model perspective

Only in very special cases, knowledge transfer can be comprehended as a simple "relocation" ("transfer") of resource, which is knowledge. Basically, it is possible only when the process of transfer is initiated for the needs of protection (relatively redistribution)¹² between the organizational units (or between organizations) of a certain resource of codified knowledge (in the form of documentation, allowing its easy storage)¹³. Therefore, in the situation when it does not involve the need to personalize knowledge resources. When the process is aimed to apply in practice knowledge resource being transferred, apart from the aspect of relocation and accumulation of resource itself, it also is necessary to assimilate new knowledge requiring such modifications, which permits its use in a different context¹⁴. For this reason, the knowledge transfer process cannot be reduced to simple "transfer" ("relocation") of knowledge resource. Under the conducted transfer (next to the aspect of transfer), it also is necessary to consider the aspect of translation and transformation¹⁵ of knowledge resource being transferred. Due to the existing language barriers, it is emphasized particularly clearly in the case of knowledge transfer in the international aspect. For this reason, in the present article, the author will apply the perspective of transfer by Ch.

⁹ Freimuth J., Krieg R., Schäder M.: Kulturelle Konflikte in deutsch-chinesischen Joint-Ventures: Dargestellt am Beispiel der Einführung von Konzepten der Personalführung. „Zeitschrift für Personalforschung“, Heft 2, 2005, s. 160.

¹⁰ Ajmal M.M., Kekäle T., Takala J.: Cultural impacts on knowledge management and learning in project-based firms. “The Journal of Information and Knowledge Management Systems”, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2009, p. 347.

¹¹ Canen A.G., Canen A.: Looking at multiculturalism in international logistics: An experiment in a higher education institution. “The International Journal of Educational Management”, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2001, p. 145.

¹² Relatively redistribution.

¹³ Hawryszkiewicz I.: Knowledge Management: Organizing knowledge based enterprises. Palgrave Macmillan, Great Britain 2010, p. 77.

¹⁴ See: Kumar J.A., Ganesh L.S.: op.cit., p. 163.

¹⁵ Carlile P.R.: Transferring, Translating, and Transforming: An Integrative Framework for Managing Knowledge Across Boundaries. „Organization Science”, Vol. 15, No. 5, 2004, p. 563.

Liyanage, T. Elhag, T. Ballal and Q. Li¹⁶. According to these authors, the transfer process covers such element as: *knowledge awareness*, *knowledge acquisition*, *knowledge transformation*, *knowledge association* and *knowledge application*. Where:

- *Knowledge awareness* means conducting the assessment of previously located resources of knowledge, in the scope, firstly, of the degree of adequacy of these resources; secondly, valuation of these resources from the point of view of the needs of the individual acquiring knowledge.
- *Knowledge acquisition* – comes down to achieving externally generated knowledge resource (as defined by creating it resources of data and information) and, which is extremely important – respective, additional knowledge resource, without which target knowledge resource cannot be transferred.
- *Knowledge transformation* – means such interpretation of the acquired knowledge resource, which will enable compilation of this resource with the already held own knowledge resources (in other words, which will enable development of the already held knowledge resource).
- *Knowledge association* – comes down to examination of potential usability of the knowledge being transformed, resulting from linking its resource to internal organizational needs.
- *Knowledge application* – means "implementation" of knowledge related to its use in practice.

The selection of the above perspective of the transfer process is justified additionally by the fact that it is consistent with the model perspective, proposed by A. B. Kayes, D.Ch. Kayes, Y. Yamazaki¹⁷, of cross-cultural knowledge transfer (CCKT) as learning¹⁸.

3. Determinations of knowledge transfer effectiveness

In the opinion of Ch. Liyanage, T. Elhag, T. Ballal and Q. Li, the level of knowledge transfer effectiveness will always be limited when¹⁹:

¹⁶ Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: Knowledge communication and translation – a knowledge transfer model. „Journal of Knowledge Management”, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2009, p. 125-127.

¹⁷ Kayes A.B., Kayes D.Ch., Yamazaki Y.: Transferring Knowledge across Cultures: A Learning Competencies Approach. „Performance Improvement Quarterly”, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2005, p. 87-100.

¹⁸ Stages distinguished by these authors (generating knowledge, gathering knowledge, organizing knowledge, acting on knowledge) correspond to the indicated and discussed above transfer elements.

¹⁹ Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: op.cit., p. 125.

1. the parties to transfer (source and sender)²⁰ participate in the process to an insufficient degree,
2. recipient²¹ does not have sufficient motivation to acquire knowledge being the object of transfer or does not have respective ability to absorb (or: assimilate and/or apply) knowledge resource subject to transmission.
3. source²² of knowledge shows low tendency to make this resource available.

Re 1. In the opinion of Ch. Liyanage and the team, the level of participation of entities participating in the transfer process depends on: (a) type of relations linking them – and – (b) nature of cooperation between them. Therefore, it is significant both between whom and at which level the transfer is made. Transfer may run within relations: person-person, person-team, team-team, within the team, team-organization and organization-organization. Within each of the aforementioned types of relations, in the opinion of these authors, from the point of view of effectiveness transfer, a considerable degree of similarity of individuals participating in transfer (i.e. recipient and source) is favorable, in particular with regard to: (a) technical and structural conditions of the context in which they function, (b) organizational culture relevant for them (c) dominant management style in their organization, and (c) (internal and external) policy conducted within its framework²³. Occurrence of this type of similarity or its lack (like relation type, under which transfer is conducted) affects character of cooperation. The authors emphasize that close cooperation²⁴ is facilitated by frequent and intimate relations²⁵. At the same time, it is worth noting that A. Butler, P. Le Grice and M. Reed²⁶ are of the opinion that, from the point of view of transfer, particular importance can be assigned to the level of trust within social relations linking people, between whom knowledge is exchanged. In their opinion, impermanent and superficial linkages between individuals are favorable for exchange of new information, but tacit knowledge transfer is conducted mostly within strong, fixed bonds with large trust level.

Re 2. Lack of sufficient motivation to acquire knowledge being the object of transfer may be both a result of: (a) low subjective assessment of the value of resource of transferred knowledge²⁷, and (b) low perceived credibility of knowledge source. Low assessment of

²⁰ Axial components of contemporary perspectives are two cells (the so-called "actors" of knowledge") – of whom one person is the source of knowledge and the other one is perceived in the category of recipient of knowledge being transferred.

²¹ Entity acquiring knowledge.

²² Entity being creator/holder/supplier of knowledge.

²³ Similar strategies of business entities are to be beneficial for transfer.

²⁴ Therefore, generation of knowledge and coordination of effective acquisition of knowledge is also to be beneficial.

²⁵ Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: op. cit, p. 127.

²⁶ Butler A., Le Grice P., Reed M.: Delimiting knowledge transfer from training. "Education & Training", Vol. 48, No. 8/9, 2006, p. 629.

²⁷ Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: op. cit, p. 127.

knowledge suitability has the same destructive effect on the transfer process as the recognition of source as unreliable. What is important, this second factor can entail non-objective factors as, for instance, deeply embedded and unrealized cultural barriers. Reality is subject to filtering through "cultural lens" of the paradigms and values appropriate for a given culture²⁸. Therefore, regardless of objective premises for assessment of knowledge source by the knowledge recipient, message appropriate for a culture of the latter is related, for instance, with the issue of sex (as well as: age, social status, denomination, sexual orientation, ability/disability) effects assessment of credibility of the source by the recipient (which, in particular, is clearly manifested at the level of transfer between individuals).

Re 3. Reluctance to share knowledge on the part of "the source" of this knowledge hinders transfer and also may shallow and even distort resource of transferred knowledge. Reluctance may: (a) be justified by aware (or unaware) fear of loss of competitive advantage, (b) result from issues of confidentiality of information, or, like in the case of assessing the level of credibility of the source (c) be a sign of unrealized cultural barriers.

Ch. Liyanage, T. Elhag, T. Ballal and Q. Li argue that, from the point of view of transfer effectiveness, meaning should be assigned to:

- capacity to understand and internalize transferred knowledge resources: Additionally, this capacity remains dependent not only on intelligence and ability of relevant individuals to learn, but also on the scope of differences in the area of education and gathered experience. The less concurrent the background, the more difficult the transfer of knowledge (for instance, Arabic philologist and IT specialist).
- type of knowledge resource subject to transfer: tacit knowledge is the most difficult for transfer²⁹.
- type of methods/techniques of transfer³⁰: Transfer effectiveness increases when various channels are used. Therefore, it is important to differentiate type and nature of actions executed for the purpose of transfer.

At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that, in the opinion of L. Argote and P. Ingram³¹, factors such as credibility of knowledge source, motivation, as well as recipient's ability to absorb it determine, to a significant degree, not only its transfer effectiveness, but also its pace.

²⁸ Ajmal M.M., Kekäle T., Takala J., op. cit, p. 348.

²⁹ The issue of meaning of knowledge type is raised also in: Taylor S., Osland J.S.: The Impact of Intercultural Communication on Global Organizational Learning. [in:] Easterby-Smith M., Lyles M.A. (ed.): Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management. Wiley, Ltd., Great Britain 2011, p. 582.

³⁰ Although knowledge transfer applies to any competitive action, it may be conducted in non-verbal manner (Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: op.cit., p. 122-123).

³¹ Argote L., Ingram P.: Knowledge Transfer: A Basis for Competitive Advantage in Firms. „Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes”, Vol. 82, No. 1, 2000, p. 163.

Thus, Ch. Liyanage, T. Elhag, T. Ballal and Q. Li assume that the proper conduct of knowledge transfer requires in practice granting answers to such questions as³²:

- to whom and for which purpose is knowledge necessary?
- who will participate in knowledge transfer?
- where is an ideal source for knowledge acquisition?
- which type of knowledge is to be transferred ?
- how?
- which factors may affect the process of knowledge transfer and to which extent?
- how can we increase the strength of factors fostering transfer?
- what should be avoided?
- what should be done to allow use of the acquired knowledge?
- has the conducted transfer process fulfilled its role (enabled execution of the intended goal)?

Ch. Liyanage, T. Elhag, T. Ballal and Q. Li prepared a list of factors important, from the point of view of effectiveness of the course of transfer, which may be considered as some canon, but it is not closed, commonly binding standard. In the opinion of L. Argote and P. Ingram, factors determining transfer result may and should include³³:

- organizational strategy,
- properties of transferred technology and tools: it is easier to carry out technology transfer, as well as tools with a lower complexity level,
- degree of adequacy of knowledge resource being transferred to situational context, under which it is to be used,
- aspect of physical distance between the source of knowledge and its target users: the possibility of direct contact with manufacturers and/or users of a given knowledge facilitates access to its area defined as tacit knowledge.

Ch.Y. Lee and F.Ch. Wu³⁴ in the context of knowledge transfer efficiency pay, in turn, attention to the category of organizational ability to assimilate, replicate and apply new knowledge gained from external sources, defined by them as "absorptive capacity". In their opinion, absorptive capacity depends both on (1) prior related knowledge, (2) level of education and academic degrees of employees, (3) individual absorptive capacity, (4) diversity of backgrounds and knowledge, as well as on (5) organization structure, (6) cross-functional communication, (7) organizational culture.

³² Liyanage Ch., Elhag T., Ballal T., Li Q.: op.cit., p. 128.

³³ Argote L., Ingram P., op.cit., p. 161-164.

³⁴ Lee Ch.Y., Wu F.Ch.: Factors Affecting Knowledge Transfer and Absorptive Capacity in Multinational Corporations. "The Journal of International Management Studies", Vol. 5, No. 2, 2010, p. 122.

4. Cultural diversity and knowledge transfer process

In the opinion of Gupta and Govindarajan³⁵, although the issues of cultural difference cannot be underestimated, the level of efficacy and effectiveness of knowledge transfer at the meeting point of cultures is not affected by the fact that transfer is conducted under conditions of cultural diversity and by this diversity level, but it is affected by:

- level of motivation of recipient to purchase knowledge: the greater the desire to acquire knowledge, the greater the transfer effectiveness,
- value the recipient assigns to knowledge resource: the higher the value of knowledge in the recipient's opinion, the greater the transfer effectiveness,
- the recipient's abilities to absorb knowledge,
- the level of motivation of the source to transfer knowledge: the lower the tendency of the source to share knowledge, the lower the transfer effectiveness,
- quantity and diversity of transfer channels: high effectiveness of transfer is fostered by the application of various channels.

It is consistent with the above discussed position of Ch. Liyanage and his team. It is not, however, commonly accepted position.

And so, it is worth noting that, in the opinion of J. Chen, P.Y. Sun and R.J. McQueen³⁶:

- the transfer of knowledge will be more effective if knowledge provider and recipient are located in similar cultural contexts rather than in different cultural contexts
- the probability of high effectiveness of the transfer of tacit knowledge increases if knowledge provider comes from a strongly collectivist-orientated culture³⁷.

The authors prove that quality and effectiveness of knowledge transfer³⁸:

- when transferring explicit knowledge: (a) are affected adversely by the use of techniques requiring individual learning if this knowledge is transferred from a knowledge provider in a small power distance culture to a recipient in a large power distance culture, (b) are affected positively by the use of techniques requiring group learning if this knowledge is transferred from a knowledge provider in a large power distance culture to a recipient in a small power distance culture,

³⁵ Gupta A.K., Govindarajan V.: Knowledge flows within multinational corporations. „Strategic Management Journal”, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2000, p. 475-476.

³⁶ Chen J., Sun P.Y., McQueen R.J.: The impact of national cultures on structured knowledge transfer. “Journal of Knowledge Management”, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2010, p. 237-239.

³⁷ The issue of who to whom transfers knowledge (who "teaches" and who "is taught") is raised also in: J.E. Salk & B.L. Simonin (see.: Salk J.E., Simonin B.L.: Collaborating, Learning and Leveraging Knowledge Across Borders: A Meta-Theory of Learning, [in:] Easterby-Smith M., Lyles M.A. (ed.): Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management. Wiley, Ltd., Great Britain 2011, p. 613-615.

³⁸ Chen J., Sun P.Y., McQueen R.J., op.cit., p. 234-237.

- in the case of transfer of tacit knowledge: (a) are affected adversely by weak relationship between a knowledge provider and a recipient created by cultural differences, (b) are affected positively by a strong relationship between a knowledge provider and a recipient created by similarity in culture.

On the other hand, according to research results conducted by D.S. Bengoa, H.R. Kaufman and G. Orange³⁹, lack of adjustment of the method of transfer of knowledge to cultural determinations of its recipients may lead to perception of the person transferring knowledge as arrogant and showing his or her superiority, but also involves high risk of recognition of knowledge as incompatible with the cultural-social context of the recipient and, as a result, to disregard and even reject it. On the contrary, R. Jensen and G. Szulanski⁴⁰, under conducted research, concluded that adaptation for the needs of transfer of original resources of knowledge substantially impeded transfer because it contributes to: (a) increasing communication problems between the source and the recipient, (b) reducing quality of relations between the source and the recipient (c) reducing identification of needed knowledge and (d) problems in implementation of transferred knowledge⁴¹.

For a change, A. B. Kayes, D.Ch. Kayes and Y. Yamazaki⁴² prove that high effectiveness of knowledge transfer at the meeting point of cultures is fostered, first of all, by:

- respect for a foreign culture: because it constitutes a natural effect of learning a foreign culture, acceptance of its specific nature and skill of appreciation of the existing differences between own and foreign culture,
- development of fixed relations with the representatives of different culture: due to the fact that tightening bonds obtained as a result of integration fosters building trust and increases the degree of understanding in respect of any emerging misunderstandings/errors,
- listening and observing: because, as a result the patterns existing in a given culture, as well as elements underlying them, are understood better,
- approval for the lack of unambiguity: due to the fact that nobody is able to master nuisances of a foreign culture (for instance, with regard to non-verbal communication, binding styling conventions, etc.) to a degree relevant for its domestic members,
- translation (from one language to another) of the essence of complex notions and information so as to maintain their main sense: care for this aspect allows avoiding some misunderstandings and unintended misrepresentations,

³⁹ Bengoa D.S., Kaufman H.R., Orange G.: Reflection on knowledge transfer methodologies in Eastern/Western European co-operations. "EuroMed Journal of Business", Vol. 4, No. 2, 2009, p. 140.

⁴⁰ Jensen R., Szulanski G.: Stickiness and the adaptation of organizational practices in cross-border knowledge transfers. "Journal of International Business Studies", Vol. 35, No. 6, 2004, p. 517.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Kayes A.B., Kayes D.Ch., Yamazaki Y., op.cit., p. 92-93.

- task-based approach: because it affects execution of actions regardless of any emerging difficulties, ambiguities and lack of confidence with regard to the achieved result,
- thinking in team categories: because it involves both the skill of delegating authority and the possibility of asking for help.

Regardless of all of the above proposals, in the case of cross-knowledge transfer context, it is worth noting additionally the fact that although presently the role of international business language is played by English, for most people employed in companies operating in a wide network of international relations, it is not their mother tongue. As practice proves, normally even at very good command of the second language, communicating using it is less efficient and is recognized to be a less rich means of communications compared to one's native language⁴³.

5. Conclusions

In the context of all the issues discussed above, regardless of difficulties related to objective assessment of the discussed phenomena, it seems a reasonably practical to formulate the following conclusions with regard to knowledge transfer at the meeting point of cultures:

- it is advised to establish cooperation between parties to transfer,
- from the point of view of transfer effectiveness, crucial role is to be played by motivation of the source to transfer knowledge and motivation of the recipient to acquire it,
- capacity of the recipient to absorb, assimilate and apply knowledge do not remain without impact on its effectiveness,
- transfer of knowledge should be conducted using various channels, in particular with the use of regular face to face contacts,
- modification of resources of knowledge intended for transfer should be avoided,
- when it is necessary to translate knowledge resource intended for transfer from one language to another, particular attention should be paid to the need for translation of the essence of complex notions and information in a way preserving their main sense,

⁴³ Luring J., Selmer J.: Multicultural organizations: common language, knowledge sharing and performance. „Personnel Review”, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2011, p. 327.

- it is required to appreciate the role which may be played within the organization, and in particular with regard to knowledge transfer (as well as mediation) by marginality play, i.e. people who have internalized two or more cultural frames⁴⁴.

The discussed postulates or principles are not exhaustive in relation to the complexity of the issue of knowledge transfer in culturally diverse environment and they are not a ready rule for solving all the problems related to this type of transfer. However, they can contribute to increased effectiveness of knowledge transfer being made under such conditions.

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⁴⁴ Taylor S., Osland J.S., op.cit., p. 587.

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