The influence of communications relationships on the efficiency of knowledge transfer : analyzed on the basis of the new institutional theory

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THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATIONS RELATIONSHIPS ON THE EFFICIENCY OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER – ANALYZED ON THE BASIS OF THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

The paper addresses a specific aspect in the management of knowledge in a company context – the transfer of knowledge. In practice, and particularly in knowledge intensive companies, it can be observed that the transfer of knowledge is considered to be a prerequisite to
... excel in global competition,
... accelerate the development of solutions and products,
... learn from experiences, successes and failures of colleagues.

The required internal communication of knowledge to achieve those goals is frequently not managed efficiently and thus offers substantial potential for improvement. In order to better understand the possibilities to improve the knowledge communication, three different communication relationships are being discussed in detail in this paper:

- The one-to-one communication relationship naturally exists in every company. However, this communication relationship does not meet the increased requirements of worldwide availability of knowledge without time lags.
- The one-to-n communication relationship represents the communication process between an employee and an electronic database. While it meets the requirements of ubiquitous availability, it still fails frequently due to a lack of motivation by the users, as they are unwilling to submit their knowledge to an anonymous database.
- The one-to-team communication relationship between employees

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within a team (or a knowledge community) is a concept that could be the basis of an efficient approach to transfer knowledge within a company.

This paper addresses the reasons and motivations for knowledge sharing (recognition, reciprocity, altruism, and financial reward) and the barriers to it (lack of motivation, lack of cognitive ability, opportunism, 'free-rider' mentality, and information asymmetry). This is done by an approach based on the new institutional economics theory, followed by an empirical examination based on 36 in-depth interviews with nine international management consultancy companies.

The starting point for this paper has been the observation in numerous consulting projects that promising initiatives of companies to better manage their knowledge resources did not yield the expected results. The goal of this paper is to analyze the reasons for these failures in general and to provide concrete measures to ensure a successful implementation of knowledge management projects focusing on knowledge transfer.

Empirical data suggests that a majority of knowledge management initiatives aim at the usage of existing knowledge (Fig. 1).

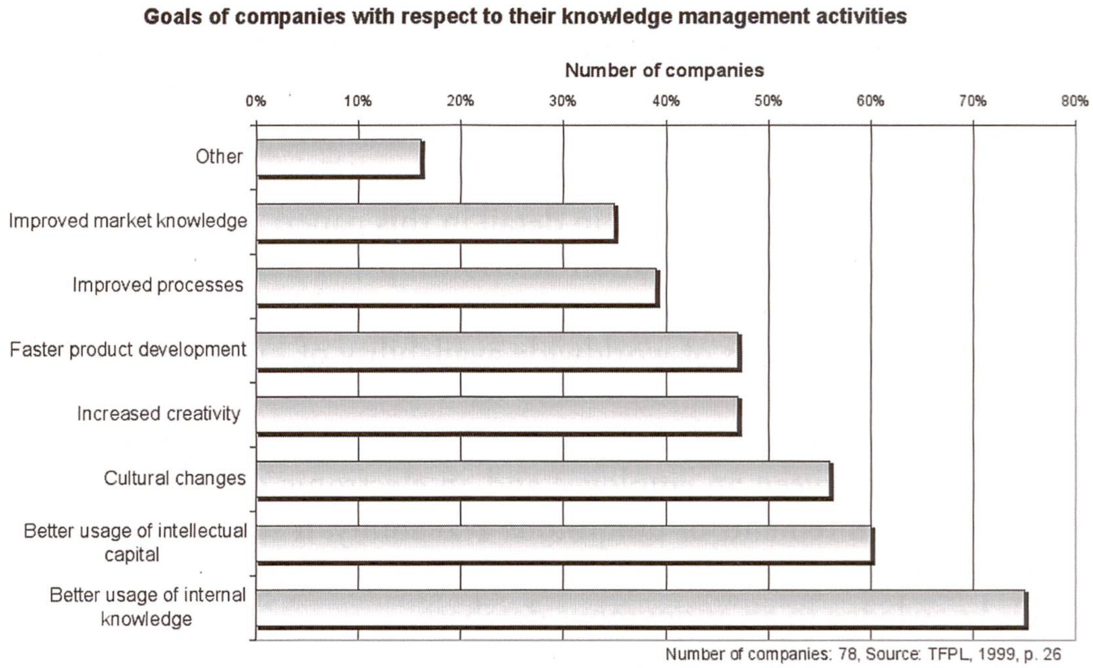

Figure 1: Goals in Knowledge Management Initiatives

To use existing knowledge, efficient knowledge transfer mechanisms are an essential prerequisite. Despite the fact that any given knowledge management initiative addresses several different aspects, the focus in this paper is predominantly on the *transfer* mechanisms of knowledge. The transfer of knowledge implies the exchange of knowledge between (at least) two agents, but it could also involve a large number of people or electronic databases. Enumerating all possible combinations would yield too many different communication settings to be analyzed thoroughly. Therefore, in this paper, groups of agents involved in knowledge communication has been limited to three: the individual, the team and the unspecified group of people, i.e. all employees of an organizational unit (department, division, company, etc.). With those three groups, all possible communication settings can be enumerated. Yet the number of possible communication relationships is too large for the scope of this paper. For that reason, the focus has been set to three particularly important communication relationships: one-to-one, one-to-team, one-to-n (see fig. 2).

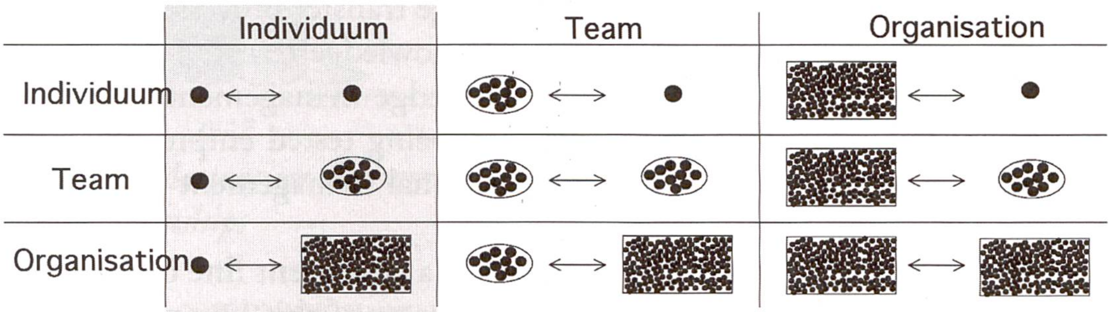

Figure 2: Communication relationship in focus

The rationale for the selection of these three relations is based on the assumption that knowledge is always closely associated with an individual, hence an analysis of the knowledge transfer e.g. n-to-n (between companies or between electronic databases) is expected to follow different sets of rules than the knowledge exchange process between individuals.

In this paper, the above described communication relationships are being analyzed from a theoretical as well as from an empirical perspective. The theoretical approach addresses the knowledge communication efficiency. The transfer of knowledge can be viewed as an (economic) transaction. For the analysis of economic transactions, an adequate theoretical paradigm has to be chosen which can explain the mechanisms of the transaction in focus. The application of the Neoclassic paradigm to the exchange of knowledge does not seem to be appropriate as the basic assumption of this paradigm is omniscience, that is, every actor has all required information, thus making knowledge transfer unnecessary.

Instead, the new institutional economic theory is specifically based on the assumption that knowledge is a limited resource. Also, the actors within this theoretical framework are subject to a limited cognitive ability to process information (bounded rationality). These assumptions make the collection of theories within the new institutional economics paradigm appropriate tools to analyze the mechanisms of knowledge transfers.

Specifically, in my research three different theories are being applied to the process of transferring knowledge:

- Principal agent theory
- Transaction cost theory
- Property rights theory

With these theories, concepts such as the 'Free-rider principle', 'information asymmetry', and 'positive external effects' can be used to describe and understand the phenomena of knowledge transfer processes.

Building on the theoretical analysis of knowledge transfer, several hypotheses are derived to explain why knowledge management initiatives sometimes fail. These hypotheses are then being tested empirically with 36 in-depth interviews with nine international management consultancies.

The hypotheses have been formulated in a consistent line of thought. The empirical study supports the major aspects of this line of thought: (1) Knowledge is regarded as an important factor of production for knowledge intensive companies. (2) The efficient exchange of knowledge between the actors within a company is considered to be important, yet problematic. (3) The most important barrier to efficient knowledge transfer is the lack of motivation of employees to share their knowledge. (4) The lack of motivation to share knowledge is expected to be based on the opinion "knowledge is power" and thus sharing knowledge is equal to losing power. However, the empirical study does not support this hypothesis. Rather, the study showed, that (5) the motivation to share knowledge is dependent on the communication relationship (see fig. 3).

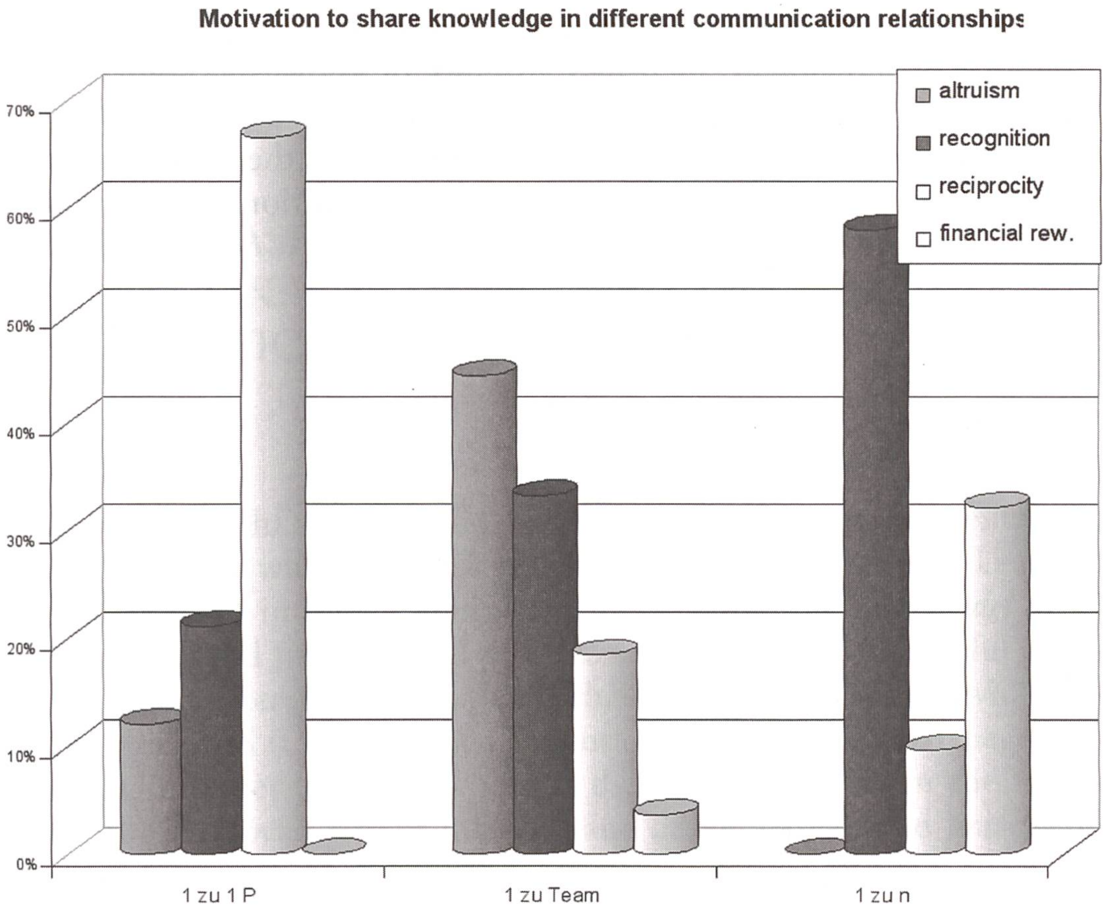

Figure 3: Motivation to share knowledge as a result of different communication relationships

(6) The communication relationship determines the efficiency of the knowledge transfer. (7) The quality of a one-to-one communication relationship for knowledge transfer is very high; also, the motivation to share knowledge in a one-to-one relationship is very high, too. However, particularly in large and globally active companies, this communication relationship is very time consuming and resource intensive. (8) The one-to-n communication relationship is very efficient in terms of time and cost for the transfer of knowledge, however, the quality of the transferred knowledge is comparably low. In addition, and more importantly, the motivation of people to share knowledge with an anonymous database is low.

The analysis of both the theoretical and the empirical results yields a set of suggestions on how to increase the efficiency of the knowledge transfer in a company context:

- Communities of practice combine the advantages of the one-to-one communication relationship (trust, recognition, broad bandwidth of

knowledge transfer) with the advantages of communication to a larger number of individuals, increased visibility of knowledge sources, and an improved availability of expert knowledge within a company.
- Electronic knowledge bases that specifically address the most important motivational aspect to share knowledge – recognition – can improve the acceptance and usage of knowledge bases.