

ABSTRACT - OLKC special stream

Are the knowledge managers really “doing” knowledge management? Local understanding and enactment of the knowledge management concept in a multinational

Since the emergence of the “knowledge-based view of the firm” (Grant, 1996a; Grant, 1996b; Spender, 1996a; Libeskind, 1996) with the focus on knowledge as the most strategically important of the firm’s resources, interest in the topic of knowledge management has undoubtedly boomed (Orlikowski, 2002). However, the term knowledge management has become a universal appellation for projects that aim at facilitating the exchange of knowledge and learning among the employees, while in reality the concept is amenable to local understanding and local enactment (Scarborough and Swan, 2001).

In support of this argument, this article presents a case study, which shows how knowledge management is understood in a multinational and how the knowledge managers enact that understanding in their knowledge management activities. It argues that because of local organizational culture and context, which contribute to modify the understanding of the concept of knowledge management, the knowledge managers may find themselves doing tasks that are not considered by the literature as knowledge management. They become the so-called knowledge managers doing so-called knowledge management activities.

The research identifies itself with the practice perspective, which has become a prominent school of thought in the management literature (Gherardi, 2009), as it studies the local doing of the knowledge managers and how they mobilize the socially, historically, and culturally defined practices to do their job and enact the local understanding of the knowledge management concept.

Relying on the philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology, the empirical investigation is carried out by the six inter-related procedures put forward by van Manen (1990). Data are collected during three years of participant-observation in different knowledge management projects of the multinational. Seven knowledge managers of its two branches are invited to participate in the study. Each of them is interviewed during two sessions of two hours. The interviews are semi-structured with open-ended questions. The interpretation relies on the respondent’s own terms and category systems rather than the researcher’s, as the goal is to describe experience in lived rather than conceptually abstract terms.

The research finds out how knowledge management and the responsibilities of the knowledge managers are defined by the multinational. It provides the individual stories of the seven knowledge managers. Each story shows how the knowledge manager does his/her job, the difficulty that he/she has to face with in local context, the actions that he/she undertakes to deal with that particular context and the nature of those actions. It also shows how they undergo their

experience of being knowledge managers, an aspect that has been largely neglected in the literature. A comprehensive review of the literature is made to identify the definitions of knowledge management and the discussions on the activities of the knowledge managers that have been put forward. The literature is then compared with the individual stories of the knowledge managers. The comparison shows that the knowledge managers, to a large extent, are not really doing knowledge management. Moreover, they do not follow the prescriptive sets of activities defined in the literature. How they work should be seen as a process in which their ongoing actions, interactions, and transaction emerge from the contact between them and the broader social and organizational situation, which shapes and is shaped by their different ways of acting.

References

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