Knowledge Accumulation and Reuse for Spinning off Firms from Learning Organizations: An Individual Knowledge Based Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The past years have seen a remarkable increase in knowledge based start-ups. In Europe, as in the USA, the debate over the role of universities and firms as knowledge clusters and as sources of new spin-off companies has intensified since the publication of recent reports. Giving the inadequacy of the classic patterns to exploit and transfer many knowledge assets, our study looked at the spin off processes from learning organizations as a way to transfer them for stimulating new entrepreneurship (i.e., in a perspective of reusing the knowledge previously accumulated). The authors’ research showed that academic and corporate spin offs are differently influenced by the knowledge accumulated in the contexts of origin. The authors also discuss some managerial implications of the proposed model.

Keywords: Academic Spin Off, Corporate Spin Off, Knowledge Transfer, Learning Organization, Reuse of Knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory of the firm and the resource-based view help to understand how, in the twilight of the importance of the tangible assets typical of the Taylorism, a business model based on a higher proportion of intangible assets as a source of not imitable competitive advantage has emerged in recent years. The effectiveness of a systemic, post-modern, corporation is profoundly influenced by the quality of the relationships that are established at various levels of management. Therefore, the complexity and the competitive pressures of modern markets has prompted the company to perceive with a greater sensitivity the signals coming from its components. Likewise, the variability of competitive dynamics has led the firm to become progressively more autonomous, by qualifying its components as knowledge performers (Nonaka & Tacheuchi, 1995). At the same time the spread of patents and the ever increasing

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commercialization of intellectual capital within worldwide universities have become a field of study of crucial relevance. In the U.S., the technology transfer from the public to the private sector is increasingly seen as a priority for the university through the creation of spin-off firms; likewise, in Europe, the debate on the role of universities as learning organizations and as sources of new spin-off companies is progressively stepping in front of the constant growth of the phenomenon, thus even becoming a part of the evaluation of the research for scholars and universities themselves. Our research looks at the spin off processes, originating from academic and corporate learning organizations, as ways to transfer knowledge based assets for creating new entrepreneurship in a perspective of reuse of knowledge (i.e. the key knowledge accumulated in the parent organization comes reused in the daughter organization by the spin off promoter).

2. THE REUSE OF THE KNOWLEDGE “NOT SHARED” WITHIN THE LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Management literature has widely stressed that the performance of an organization depend on the type of knowledge and from the context where knowledge is produced (Hamel & Prahalad, 1991; Carayannis & Wang, 2012). Industrialization, for instance, requires more knowledge codification, which supports the repetitiveness and standardization of production processes as well as more efficient and effective control systems of the production activities, especially in terms of quality and costs. Then organisational learning can be interpreted as a process by which a “learning” organization, in which knowledge is accumulated for the effect of group interactions, creates its own set of new knowledge assets (Nonaka, 1991, 1994; Nicotra et al., 2013).

Organisational learning is mainly considered, in the managerial and psychological literature, as an organisational experimentation process based on the creative use of both direct and indirect experience of individuals (Weick, 1993). Thus organizational learning is strictly related to individual learning, as well (Kim, 1993). Then, when new knowledge is developed by individuals it should be disseminated and shared with the whole working community (Kolb, 1984; Del Giudice & Straub, 2011).

In reality there are many cases in which knowledge, particularly the tacit one, is not shared by the individuals with the rest of the organization. Sometimes it simply happens that people do not want to share it with the others (Garvin, 1993); but, in some other cases, numerous studies have demonstrated the inherent difficulty of transferring that kind of knowledge by separating it from the individuals who hold it (Senge, 1992; Goh, 1998). Moreover, just very few studies have pointed on what happens when this knowledge is retained by the individuals which did not share it with their working environment (Mabey & Salaman, 1995; Dovey, 1997).

The constructivist theories of learning, for instance, have argued that knowledge often remains resident in its context of origin: scholars in that discipline have criticized the possibility of transferring knowledge outside an individual because, according to them, each individual brings his own vision of the world, resulting from his perceptions and personal experiences most which are formed outside the organization itself (Weick, 1993; Wenger, 1998). Likewise Richter (1999) and De Geus (1997) concurred with this by identifying several barriers to knowledge sharing and transferring. Firstly, translation is seen as a barrier to transfer: the task of explaining is seen as too complex and therefore not worth trying to ‘translate’ the knowledge to others. Secondly, the solitude of people leads to losing the habit of sharing and translating for others. Thirdly, although people stated they had learnt from interpreting and codifying information given to them they did not see a need to pass this on.

Psycho-managerial studies have confirmed it, as well: knowledge within learning organi-
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