Individual Level Knowledge Transfer in Virtual Settings: A Review and Synthesis

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ABSTRACT
Since the emergence of the knowledge-based view of the firm in the mid-1990s, researchers have made considerable effort to untangle the complexity of how individuals create, capture and realize value from knowledge. To date, this burgeoning field has offered rich and yet diverse insights involving contextual, process and outcome factors that influence individual level knowledge transfer. Concomitantly globalization and advancing technologies have extended virtual work arrangements such as virtual teams and virtual communities on the internet and considerably extended the knowledge base upon which individuals can draw when creating, acquiring, sharing and integrating knowledge. Research on individual level knowledge transfer has also embraced these virtual environments spawning new insights. Hence the objective of this paper is to assess current state of research and identify potential avenues for future research at the intersection of these two dimensions. The authors focus specifically on knowledge transfer research at the individual level instead of the team or firm level and within virtual settings. Applying a process view of knowledge transfer, they synthesize existing findings and discuss issues surrounding the inputs, processes, and outputs. The synthesis reveals both strengths and gaps in the literature. Accordingly, the authors offer directions for future research that may address the gaps and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of individual level knowledge transfer in virtual settings.

Keywords: Individual Level, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Transfer, Literature Review, Virtual Settings

INTRODUCTION
Since the early 1990s, researchers have explored the role, value and challenges of knowledge as the principal strategic resource to be managed in firms (Grant, 1996). Over the ensuing decades, research has proliferated and expanded our understanding of the strategic value and competitive advantage of managing knowledge effectively and efficiently at a firm level, at the level

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of groups or teams and as a key capability and responsibility of individuals (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). This knowledge-based view of the firm has emerged concurrent with globalization and technological innovations which extend the reach and range of organizational activity across dimensions of geography, cultures, time zones and into new forms of inter-organizational arrangements and consequently made the context for knowledge management more complex and rich in both practical and scholarly terms (Griffith et al., 2003). Not surprisingly research in this area has expanded rapidly and it is increasingly difficult for researchers to comprehend and situate new research in this vast domain.

In this research, we take on the challenge of reviewing and extending our understanding of an important subset of research in this area. Specifically we are interested in understanding the present state of research at the intersection of two dimensions of the broad phenomenon: individual level knowledge transfer and virtual contexts. By individual level knowledge transfer we include a range of knowledge activities. We are interested in understanding the current state and future directions of research which has investigated how individuals acquire, store, and process knowledge that they get from or give to others or to knowledge management systems. By virtual contexts, we aim to pay particular attention to research which has engaged the myriad of mediated and non-face to face settings of early research into individual knowledge transfer activities. Our choice is based on the observation that advances in information technology have changed how firms organize the workplace and accelerated the emergence of virtual work arrangements such as virtual teams and virtual organizations (Igbaria, 1999; Saunders, 2000). A virtual work arrangement typically involves flexible hours, a geographically distributed work environment, and functionally and culturally diverse workers who are connected by intensive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). At the same time as the work environment has become more virtual, people’s daily lives have also gone virtual to some extent. The last decade has seen dramatic changes in how individuals interact with organizations (online banking, online shopping, etc.) and with other people for help seeking, social functions or recreation (online communities, social networks, online games, virtual world, etc.). As Yoo (2010) pointed out, the digitalization of everyday artifacts, networks, and the global infrastructure has become a part of one’s everyday life experience.

One of the well-articulated benefits of virtual environments is that individuals are able to access an extended knowledge base through collaborative activities (Paul, 2006) – with convenient communication and collaboration enabled by ICTs, knowledge can be transferred from individuals who possess it to individuals in need regardless of their locations. This benefit is of great value because knowledge transfer among employees complements formal training and has profound impacts (Larsen & McInerney, 2002). Research shows that fifty percent of all employee skills become outdated within three to five years in this global and digital age, and as a result a growing number of individuals are seeking formal and more frequently informal knowledge acquisition opportunities to upgrade their skills and competencies (Shank & Sitze, 2004). Such a need for new knowledge makes knowledge transfer within teams, organizations or communities crucial to individuals’ and organizational performance.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, based on a descriptive and explanatory overview of the existing literature, we are able to develop a number of research questions and directions that hold significant potential to guide future research and advance the understanding of the focal phenomenon. Second, it stresses and elaborates the role of individuals in the knowledge transfer processes in virtual settings and examines individual level variables, which can be used to complement existing research at the team and organizational levels and contribute to a more comprehensive knowledge-based view of the firm. It provides useful information that can be applied to develop more complex models/frameworks (e.g., a multi-level framework) in
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