Chapter XIV
Achieving Organizational Independence of Employees’ Knowledge using Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning, and the Learning Organization

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ABSTRACT

The ambition of this chapter is to pay some attention to more obvious, as well as more subtle, methods for organizations to become independent of the individual’s subjective knowledge, from the employees’ point of view. Terms such as ‘knowledge sharing’, ‘knowledge transfer’, and ‘learning for all’ are almost always seen as being positive for both employers and employees. However, this chapter will critically examines those terms. Three popular management ideas relating to knowledge and/or learning have been analysed from a ‘knowledge control’ perspective: knowledge management, organizational learning, and the learning organization. The main conclusion of this conceptual and elaborating chapter is that the more current and less academic ideas of the learning organization and knowledge management contain the same tools as the idea of ‘old’ organizational learning as regards gaining control over knowledge, but that these two ideas additionally contain other knowledge control measures, which are more refined, in the sense that they are less obvious as knowledge control measures. The idea of ‘new’ organizational learning, however, is less suited to knowledge control, since it implies that knowledge is not storable. In other words, the chapter’s contribution is an analysis of some of the most popular management ideas that deal with knowledge and/or learning relating to the organizational/employer independence of subjective knowledge, from the employees’ point of view, something which is rarely seen.
INTRODUCTION

We are said to live in a ‘knowledge society’. If this is true, it would mean, among other things, that individuals and their subjective knowledge are becoming more important at the expense of machines and other so called ‘resources’. Droege and Hoobler recently (2003: 50) described one of the problems of the ‘knowledge economy’ stating that employees’ knowledge ‘is rarely shared, swapped, traced, and fertilized to ensure that it remains, at least in part, with the firm when employees leave’.

There are, however, ways for organizations to become more or less independent of any one individual and her or his subjective knowledge. The aim of this chapter is to identify and draw attention to such means, which are sometimes obvious but often quite subtle, in the following management ideas concerning knowledge and/or learning in an organizational context: organizational learning, the learning organization, and knowledge management. I have analysed literature on these ideas in order to highlight and ‘unveil’ means enabling organizations to become independent of the individual’s subjective knowledge.

Organizations interfere a lot in every single person’s life; Deetz (1992) has even claimed that organizations ‘colonize’ us and our world – we grow up in organizations (child care centres, schools, etc.), we shop in them, we work there, etc. They can easily – like giants – in one way or another destroy the originality of the only thing that makes individuals unique on the labour market: subjective knowledge. There is always a risk that all knowledge will stay within, or be transferred to, organizations. The employees – and especially their subjective knowledge – run the risk of being exploited. Therefore, it is so important to unveil all the means enabling employers to become independent of the individual’s subjective knowledge, for instance in popular management ideas, which this chapter is about.

Most of the management literature generally seems to view the struggle to become independent of subjective knowledge as risk reduction, if it is acknowledged at all. From such a functionalistic perspective, independence struggles are thus a necessity that organizations – and in particular employers – would not be able to cope without. For instance, Bonora and Revang (1993) discussed strategies for reducing firms’ dependence on subjective knowledge, by building knowledge into the organization and by building exit barriers. Clegg argued that:

*If management can reduce their dependency on individuals as the bearers of knowledge and skills by rendering these skills into computer-based artifacts, it is possible to manipulate and combine these with other factors of production in ways that are impossible if these skills remain a human possession.*

(Clegg, 2000: 87-88)

Stovel and Bontis (2002: 310) argued that ‘senior managers must implement knowledge management strategies to ensure that monies they have spent on the training and operation of departments are not wasted when voluntary turnover occurs within the firm’.

I will instead view the means enabling organizations to become independent of subjective knowledge from a more critical perspective, thus following in the footsteps of pioneers such as Braverman (1974), and view them as concrete tools for gaining control over knowledge. From such a critical perspective, current and more hidden means of controlling knowledge are hardly signs of a new trend, rather they are extensions of earlier ways of controlling knowledge, such as slavery, where the workforce was (and at some places in the world still is) owned, and Taylorism, where the employees are alienated from knowledge of the whole product/service and are only allowed to learn and master narrow, specialised work tasks, which could also be expressed in terms of control by deskilling the employees (Braverman,