Chapter XVII

Communicated Knowledge in Electronically Enabled Business Interactions

Violina Ratcheva
The University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Virtual teams have been increasingly cited as an efficient and flexible novel form of organisational arrangements affected by the emergence of the electronic business space. The purpose of forming such teams is a new ‘knowledge creation’. The paper argues that unraveling the mystery of knowledge creation processes in virtual partnerships requires an in-depth understanding of the complex interaction processes involved in forming computer-mediated business relationships. The focus, therefore, is on the process of collective ‘knowing’, defined as the team’s actions and interactions embedded in unique social activities in virtual teams, rather than on knowledge being a pre-given resource possessed by the team members. The paper presents the preliminary
results of a qualitative research study on seven virtual partnerships and proposes an initial conceptual framework of the knowledge creative processes taking place in virtual business relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams have been increasingly cited as an efficient and flexible novel form of organisational arrangements becoming increasingly popular in a global business environment (Kristof et al., 1995; Townsend et al., 1996; Grenier, Metes, 1995). Teamwork in a virtual organisation is essential to tap into the best talent to create the highest quality and fastest response to customer needs. The key purpose of such teams is a new ‘knowledge creation’ and applying it into novel combinations of products and services (Seufert et al., 1999). Virtual teams are usually formed by experts or scientists with diverse expertise and, therefore, the knowledge required for successfully completing a project is not ‘owned’ by any team member, but is embedded in the dynamics and patterns of a team’s communications and interactions which can enable members to blend their individual expertise and collectively develop the required new knowledge.

The view adopted in this paper is that new knowledge creation is collectively constructed and embedded in the organising practices of virtual teams’ activities. Despite the lack of consensus amongst scholars on the exact nature of the virtual organising principles, recent studies suggest that virtual teams are not simply an evolutionary form of co-located teams and they represent novel patterns of interactions and social exchange (Ratcheva, Vyakarnam, 2000). On one hand, the boundaries of such partnerships are blurred and only socially constructed by the network members. On the other, the issues around socialising in such teams are distinctively different because the co-existence of ‘space’ and ‘place’ represents a fundamental change in the business environment. Although the two spaces are not mutually exclusive and sometimes overlap with each other in the organisation and execution of activities, the rules governing the two spaces are fundamentally different. To survive, therefore, companies adopting a virtual business model must not only exploit geographical differences and overcome geographical constraints in the physical world, but also exploit opportunities and face threats in the new electronic space (Lombard, Ditton, 1997).

This paper argues that unravelling the mystery of knowledge creation processes in distant relationships requires an in-depth understanding of the complex interaction processes involved in forming business relationships enabled by computer-mediated communications. The focus, therefore, is on the process of ‘knowing’ in distant interactions involving unique social activities rather than ‘knowledge’ as a pre-given resource possessed by team members. The paper draws upon the results of a qualitative research study of seven virtual partnerships and presents an initial framework of the knowledge creative processes in virtual business relationships.
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