Chapter 3
Knowledge Integration in the Creative Process of Globally Distributed Teams

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this chapter is to analyse knowledge integration in the creative process of globally distributed teams as they develop new products. Mainstream researches and studies focus on knowledge integration in terms of transference of knowledge; they highlight its relevance with respect to innovation and creativity, and investigate the conditions that assure or inhibit it. The creative process in globally distributed teams is fairly unexplored by academic literature. With only a few exceptions, the literature focuses on virtual teams: i.e., distributed teams where factors such as culture, time zone and language are irrelevant to the development of the activities carried out by team members. The authors concentrate their efforts in looking for how knowledge integration happens in the creative process in globally distributed teams. For this reason, they shall rely on a research method founded on the notions of adequate causation and objective possibility. On this basis, they have compared two empirical cases in order to answer their research question. The authors have thus analysed six global product development projects carried out by globally distributed teams belonging to a Swedish company working with teams in France and Brazil; and an Italian company working with teams in Tunisia. The data has been gathered through participant observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis from 2007 to 2009. This contribution is grounded in the analysis of the existing literature and in the data collected on the field.

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INTRODUCTION

“How and why does knowledge integration occur in the creative process of GDT as they develop new products”?

Using a qualitative approach, this chapter aims to investigate knowledge integration in the creative process of globally distributed teams (GDT) involved in new product development projects. The question being posed has its focus on “how” and “why” phenomena occur. “How” and “why” are explanatory questions, yet they are more concerned with the conditions occurring within a timeframe, rather than with their frequency and incidence. For this reason, recurring to the notions of adequate causation and objective possibility (Weber, 1904, 1906) seems to be more appropriate than recurring to the notions of probable or necessary causation.

The spreading of GDT can be related to a series of circumstances, amongst which there is the interest of bringing together often fragmented knowledge and information from branches of multinational organizations scattered across the globe. This working configuration has proliferated because of globalization, which entices organizations to recognize dispersed competencies.

When we interact with people we have an opportunity to learn, to influence, and to make things happen (Gurteen, 1998). “Team creative process” has been defined by Gilson & Shalley (2004) as members working together in such a manner that they link ideas from multiple sources, delve into unknown areas to find better or unique approaches to a problem, or seek out novel ways of performing a task. According to Baba, Gluesing, Ratner & Wagner (2004) team members of different cultures can bring together divergent bodies of knowledge whose integration yields new organizational capabilities - but only after they recognize both the existence and the validity of their differences.

On the basis of the comparison between two empirical cases, our proposal is to assess whether some conditions can be regarded as adequate conditions that allow the occurrence of knowledge integration in the creative process of GDT involved in new products development projects. We will therefore rely upon the conditional scheme of explanation put forward by Weber (1904, 1906).

BACKGROUND

In this section we first present a review of the literature, and then clarify our perspective on knowledge integration and our position with respect to the creative process in GDT.

The new wave of digital technologies has given organizations an enormous opportunity to bring together their distributed workforce and develop the ability to work together in spite of being bodily apart (Prasad & Akhilesh, 2002). Moreover, as the business environments are no longer confined to physical borders, geographically dispersed teams overcome the limitations of time, space, and the organizational affiliation of traditional local teams (Piccoli, Powell & Ives, 2004). In the literature it has been argued that GDT can be defined as a work team made up of culturally different members based in two or more nations who share collective responsibilities (Baba et al., 2004), who are brought together by information and communication technologies to jointly accomplish one or more organizational tasks and to reach a common goal in the organization (Paulus, 2000; Cohen & Bailey, 1997).

According to the existing literature, the concept of creativity is strictly connected to that of innovation. Creativity can be defined as “the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain” (Amabile, 1996). Innovation is generally defined as a phenomenon associated with purposeful change (Drucker, 2007), reflecting the capacity to imagine what does not exist, and is a process with different stages that extends from an idea, or a new combination of existing ideas (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Schumpeter, 1942), to its
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