Chapter XVIII

Knowledge Acquisition and Management: Perspectives, Strategic Implications, and Extensions to the Virtual Setting

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This chapter provides an integrative review and synthesis of the knowledge acquisition and management literature. As a starting point, the role of the individual in organizational learning processes is discussed and reconciled. This issue is extended and discussed for the virtual setting. In following sections, the author derives three major theoretical principles from the literature synthesis. These include the knowledge types, knowledge acquisition processes, and organizational memory. Again, each of these principles are extended to the virtual setting. Based on the integration of these principles, a number of conceptual refinements are offered and important strategic implications elaborated. Subsequently, the strategic implications are contrasted and developed for the virtual setting. Communication constraints inherent to the virtual organization bring a unique and likely problematic set of issues with regard to the development and management of organizational knowledge.

The topics of knowledge acquisition and management have assumed a position of importance in both research and theory, as well as in contemporary management practice. This is true to the extent that some firms have now explicitly recognized the role of knowledge acquisition and management by including “knowledge managers” in their organizational charts. Likewise, in the business academy, knowledge acquisition and management have been the topics of numerous articles and several special issues of leading journals in business disciplines.

Some theorists go so far as to suggest that knowledge acquisition and processing are the “raison d’etre” for the firm (Weick & Westley, 1996). Others have worked toward a
knowledge-based theory of the firm, advocating knowledge creation and management as the only durable means to competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996). Many would contend that, at the very least, knowledge acquisition is a strategic imperative for the contemporary firm.

Assuming that such claims have some validity, exploring the implications of knowledge acquisition for the business disciplines and practitioners is a worthwhile endeavor. Osborn & Hagedoorn (1997) strongly urge that we need to “unpack the issue of organizational learning to explicitly deal with what is being learned, the setting in which it occurs, and the types of changes needed...” (p. 271). As such, this chapter aims to provide an overview of knowledge acquisition/organizational learning literature, synthesize it, and derive some unifying observations and fundamentals. Based on the theoretical fundamentals derived from the literature, the paper offers conceptual refinements and a number of important strategic implications. Importantly, throughout, the paper extends current knowledge acquisition and management theory to a unique, pervasive, and increasingly important managerial setting, i.e., the virtual team or organization. In addition, the chapter offers and extends strategic implications for virtual organizations.

The literature relevant to knowledge acquisition is quite vast. However, in reading the learning literature, several theoretical principles or dimensions emerge as key. These include: knowledge types, knowledge acquisition processes (or learning processes), and organizational memory. Before this chapter commences with the review and synthesis of these three fundamental issues and their extensions to the virtual setting, the beginning section explicates the role of the individual in firm knowledge acquisition. In the remaining sections of the chapter, conceptual refinements and strategic implications involving knowledge conversion, knowledge acquisition as episodic or continuous, knowledge deployment, potential contingent and complementary effects of knowledge bases, deliberateness of knowledge acquisition, and knowledge acquisition speed are developed and discussed. Each of these refinements and strategic implications are extended to the virtual setting. The chapter concludes with a discussion of further research implications.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN FIRM LEVEL KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

The literature reveals some significant disparities on the role of the individual in firm level processes. Nelson & Winter (1982) imply that the firm is a learning entity unto itself. In their view, the firm is some extra-rational or hyper-rational cognizing entity apart from the individuals who comprise it. Conversely, Dodgeson (1993) suggests that organizations do not learn, only individuals can learn. Basically, Dodgeson contends that the use of the individual analogy has led us astray in believing organizations can learn.

Some consensus seems to be emerging in the middle ground between these two opposing views. Most agree that individuals in the firm play an integral role in organizational knowledge acquisition. Yet, fundamentally, learning at the individual level is a social process, an activity that cannot occur without group interaction in some form. Individuals learn from the collective, while at the same time the collective learns from individuals. Thus, organizational learning involves a complex interplay between the
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