

Sharing knowledge as a source of personal power

Presents a discussion about sharing knowledge as a source of personal power based on the ABIPTI's case study

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Introduction

If knowledge is power, why should I share it? Almost everyone has heard of or given some consideration to this question. As we embarked on a project that required researchers from across Brazil to share their precious personal knowledge, we decided to face this challenge head on.

The project was developed for The Brazilian Research Institutions Trade Association (ABIPTI), an organization that represents 120 research institutions across Brazil. ABIPTI's goals include information dissemination, lobbying, benchmarking and training.

Our objective has been to deepen connections between the research institutions, to cultivate knowledge sharing and to promote Communities of Practice (CoP). There is a strong potential for change from local, isolated perspectives to a broad, networked perspective and compelling examples. The project highlighted 16 pertinent reasons why knowledge sharing contributes to personal power and helped to bring a greater awareness of the concepts and tools of Knowledge Management to ABIPTI participants.

The project has shown that dealing with personal perceptions about the value of sharing knowledge is one the pillars for success in building communities of practice and networks that can also enhance personal returns.

Theoretical Foundation

Authors and thinkers have predicted that, by means of new levels and forms of networking, we're beginning to see a rapid change in the role performed by large corporations and the emergence of a picture of how work should be carried out in the 21st century¹. The Internet is significantly increasing the importance of the concepts of clusters and integration among companies. Unlike more traditional and symbiotic forms, the new ways of networking are not restricted by geographic barriers. They do not involve crossed shareholdings (for instance, Japanese *keiretsus*), and the information exchange goes far beyond that which would be required to complete production orders. In many cases, exchanges of "intangibles" (information or knowledge) are, in fact, the only relevant exchanges among the members of competitive clusters. In this new era, the participants of these networks collaborate to attend to the long- and short-term needs of their customers and to create new knowledge and products².

The theoretical foundation and rationale for the project has included important conclusions from these studies:

1. Michael Porter's *Competitive Advantage of Nations*, which called attention to the atmosphere of learning, cooperation and high competition existing in micro-regions;

¹ Malone, T. W. & Laubacher, R.J., *All change for the e-lance economy*, FP Mastering, National Post, July 10, 2001

² Tapscott, D; Ticoll, D & Lowy, A, *Digital Capital: harnessing the power of business webs*, HBS Press, 2000

2. Anna Lee Saxenian's Regional Advantage, which linked the development of the Silicon Valley with the informal flows and networks of collaboration and knowledge among enterprises, universities and government³;
3. Studies of Japanese *kairatsus* that support high level of cooperation and exchange of information among companies in the productive chain;
4. Studies of European "syndicates of companies". These are associations of small and medium companies that do not compete against each other and are co-proprietors of "cooperatives" that assume responsibility for activities in common, such as: marketing, distribution, entry into foreign markets, licensing of technology, etc⁴;
5. Research on networks between small and medium enterprises in Australia and Asia that showed that even when networked technologies were adopted to allow connectivity between companies, the potential for knowledge exchange was highly dependent on the level of trust⁵;
6. Research on inter-organizational communities of practices that reinforced the idea that collaboration is "a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process"⁶.

³ Saxenian, A., *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128*, Harvard University Press, 1996

⁴ *The Economist*, Will the corporation survive? November 1st, 2001

⁵ Braun, P., *Digital knowledge networks: Linking communities of practice with innovation*. *Journal of Business Strategies*, 2002. 19(1): p. 43-54., in: *Inter-Organizational Communities of Practice* by C. van Winkelen

⁶ Lawrence, T., N. Philips, and C. Hardy, *Watching whale watching. Exploring the discursive foundations of collaborative relationships*. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 1999.

All of the above references suggest that companies that belong to competitive clusters work, in general, synergistically and/or may hold various common interests. Among the most typical common interests the following may be mentioned: satisfaction of final customers, technological development, sectoral or local regulation, work force training, development of infrastructure, exports, relations with the government, academia and other not-for-profit institutions, etc.

In this emerging scenario and with this new understanding, we believe that it is very hard for enterprises and institutions from developing countries to survive the challenges imposed by international competition, let alone succeed in making themselves competitive. The external competition with companies from developed countries require other forms of learning to be much more prominent and demand much more modern strategies to speed up both the creation and the flow of knowledge within and among enterprises and other institutions, such as research centers, universities, trade and industrial associations, governments, etc. To overcome the disadvantages in terms of resources and solid knowledge institutions, they must of necessity employ coordinated educational, managerial and business strategies, proactively incorporated into the environment.

There is a synergistic and innovative opportunity to strengthen certain economic clusters, regions and value chains. Important regional development and/or productive chain strategies are beginning to appear, which take into account, at the same time, the concepts of Cluster Economics and Knowledge Management and which leverage corporate portals technologies.

The ideas discussed in this section formed the foundation that led to the implementation of the project presented below.

35(4): p. 479-502. in: *Inter-Organizational Communities of Practice* by C. van Winkelen

Project Background

Brazil has made huge strides in terms of its overall industrial and technological outputs in the last three decades. During this period, the Brazilian Government financed and built a wide university and public research institute system. As a result Brazil's contribution to science, measured by the Science Citation Index of the Institute for Scientific Information improved significantly from 2,000 articles per year in 1980, to over 12,000 articles in 2000.

Despite this success, it is clear that Brazil's current Innovation System will have to be redrawn in face of the need to foster new levels of collaboration and to leverage scarce research resources. In the fairly recent past, it was possible for some research institutes in Brazil to provide adequate services and produce locally-relevant research based on their own physical and intellectual resources. This has changed dramatically due to the fact that the web has made geographical distances a lot less relevant and that knowledge seekers find it much easier to find relevant providers, vendors and institutions located almost anywhere.

It was in this context that we were invited by ABIPTI to help them in their efforts to disseminate knowledge management (KM) practices. In phase 1 of our work, which started in late 2002, we offered training about KM to close to 200 people in various regions of Brazil. During the next phase (as of mid-2003) we helped to actually put KM into practice by way of developing Communities of Practices involving people from the leading member organizations belonging to ABIPTI.

For these first two phases of our work, fifteen research institutes were selected - the best managed & top performing. These included a broad range of organizations:

1. From small (300 researchers) to large organizations (3000 researchers);
2. From very sector focused (e.g. agriculture, oil, nuclear) to very diversified research institutes;
3. From private foundations to government-owned (States and Federal entities);
4. From the very south to the very north of Brazil (see Figure 1 below).

Currently (mid-2004), in phase 3 of the project, there are approximately 30 institutions that have representatives participating in the project with the numbers of participating members and the flow of valuable information and knowledge growing weekly.

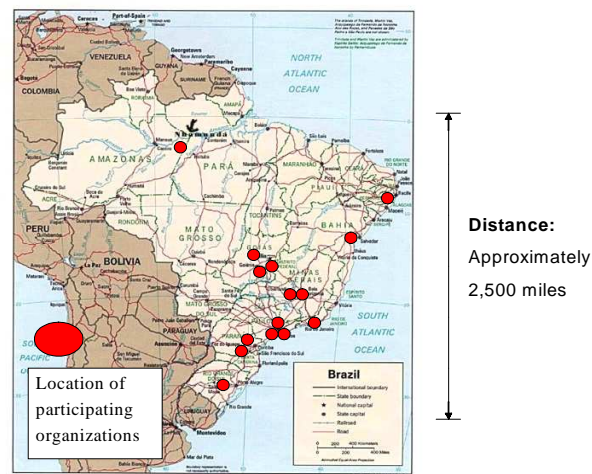


Figure 1: Location of initial 15 participating institutes

The initial focus was on developing Communities of Practice that extended across all 15 organizations and aimed at rapidly achieving tangible results that would in turn foster the development of KM initiatives within each of the fifteen research institutes. To initiate this project, **four** Communities of Practice were selected by topic area: Management & Commercialization of

Intellectual Property, Quality Management, “Geological Risks” and Food Safety. These topic areas were chosen for the following reasons:

1. There was enough critical mass in terms of available digital content, as well as interested and qualified personnel;
2. They are well-defined topics;
3. They are topics that can engage and motivate wide participation;
4. They are strategic topics with a wide gap between the top and bottom performers;
5. A number of people interested in promoting debates and knowledge exchanges were identified;
6. A few experts that could help with valuable initial content were also identified;
7. These are topics that are directly related to the services provided to the clients of these research institutes;
8. These communities can rapidly expand to include people from other types of organizations (industry, government and universities, etc).

A Knowledge Portal was built with key functionalities to support the development of these CoPs. Examples of key functionalities included:

1. Knowledge Bases;
2. Members' Directories;
3. Content and Document Management;
4. Advanced Search;
5. Events Management;
6. Alert and Subscription Tools, Forums, Personalization, etc.

Throughout the design and development of these CoPs, a number of face-to-face meetings were held. These meetings were critical not only for defining key aspects of the tools and the organization of documents (e.g. taxonomy), but also for building trust and understanding among members of the research institutes.

Knowledge-Sharing Cultures?

Initially, the concepts of Cluster Economics, Knowledge Management, Corporate Portals and Communities of Practice were not very clear among the executives and researchers of these organizations. Consequently, the first phase of this project involved many training sessions and events. These training sessions had two key objectives: (1) explaining the concepts and tools of Knowledge Management; (2) changing the mindset of the employees and researchers of these institutions from a local, isolated perspective to a broad, networked perspective – a knowledge sharing perspective.

We knew from the start that people and organizations will not voluntarily share what they know if they do not trust the other parties or see specific gains. The degree of trust, however, is rooted in history, myths and a set of prevailing values while people tend to have less trust in individuals of another race, country or culture⁷. Trust develops over time and does

⁷ Interesting research and publications on “trust” include:

- [Alesina, A. & La Ferrara, E., Who trusts others?, Journal of Public Economics, 2001](#)

not readily increase. Given the enormous distances in Brazil and its many sub-cultures, this alone was an important challenge for the project.

It is also well-known that some individuals, organizations and cultures can be a lot more innovative, knowledge-sharing or process-oriented than others. Cultures, however, are very slow to change. We accepted that it would be impossible to move the project ahead based on the idea that the specific cultures of so many organizations would need to be changed and decided to help individuals to learn some benefits from sharing their valued knowledge. The motivation was not grounded in trying to change people's intrinsic values, but by helping the individuals from these institutions to learn how personal knowledge and power are created in the Networked and Knowledge Era.

Thus, sixteen reasons to share personal knowledge were discussed in depth:

1. Organizations are increasingly valuing people who share their knowledge

The plain truth is that most managerial systems were not designed to explicitly acknowledge or reward people who share their knowledge. This, however, is changing. Leading organizations are making "knowledge-sharing" a formal and stated core value. There are many examples of organizations that are:

2. including knowledge sharing in their core values;
3. organizing internal events to celebrate knowledge sharing;

4. setting-up offline and online support systems to increase knowledge sharing;

5. hiring people whose key mission is to facilitate knowledge sharing;

6. measuring exchanges of valuable information, etc.

7. People who share their knowledge gain visibility and notoriety

In an age where power sources are fleeting, unstable and increasingly grounded on intangibles, individuals that aim to build a thriving career and professional life are increasingly dependent on their level of visibility and notoriety. This has always been true. Nowadays, however, as allegiance to a specific organization diminishes dramatically, an individual's visibility and notoriety becomes a key personal asset.

8. People who share their knowledge are acknowledged and appreciated

Similar to reason number two, but more focused on the intrinsic rewards, it is important to discuss the fact that sharing in itself can deliver tremendous value to individuals. As the philosopher and psychologist William James once said: "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated".

9. Knowledge-sharing is required in order to belong to networks that help filter information

One of the hottest drivers of knowledge management is information overload. Articles, books and technologies address this fast growing challenge for many individuals working in the fast lane of the Knowledge Era. This is indeed one of "the" challenges of the 21st Century. At the current rate of increase in the volume of information being created and distributed worldwide, it will likely get much worse before an important breakthrough in handling information (besides current personalization technology) makes the

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- Clark, K. & Sifton, M., *The Sequential Prisoner's Dilemma: Evidence on Reciprocation*, Economic Journal, January, 2000
 - Fukuyama, F., *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, Penguin Books, 1995
 - Glaeser, E. et al., *Measuring Trust*, Quarterly Journal of Economics, August 2000

situation better. In this fascinating scenario, the answer may lie in personal networks that help individuals scan and filter information.

10. Sharing is key to personal learning

Any teacher, instructor or professor will tell you that teaching is a huge motivator to self-development and learning. Indeed people can learn in many ways as they teach. Teaching requires reflection, synthesis and the ability to reconfigure one's own knowledge and experience to adapt to specific contexts. Knowledge-sharers also learn because other people seek them out for advice, debate and feedback. People who do not share do not benefit as much from the input of others and may miss out on opportunities to rethink their own assumptions and discover new insights based on particular inputs and questions.

11. Knowledge-sharing works as an important currency

As information, knowledge and expertise are increasingly valued, knowledge-sharers may be granted access to other people's knowledge more easily. Knowledge has an asymmetric nature: it may cost nothing for the giver and be greatly valued by the receiver. Thus one can say that knowledge-sharers may be entitled to a good cost/benefit through their knowledge exchanges.

12. Personal networks are increasingly important for one's professional advancement

The importance of personal networks for professional advancement has been proven by many studies and justified by simple intuition. This is known as the power of "weak ties" or as the value of social capital. If this was true in the past, today is even more so. First, as loyalties between organizations and employees are reduced, the networks become more important both for professional advancement and as some kind of personal insurance against unforeseen layoffs. Secondly, the web has allowed individuals to maintain and even

develop relationships with people that they do not see face-to-face on a regular basis.

13. Knowledge codification may reduce experts' work

Some people that are currently sought after for specific advice or information can reduce their workload by simply writing down some of their past experience and by sharing very specific information.

14. Digital codification greatly amplifies reach at a very low cost

Some people have learned to use the web as a great amplifier of their personal reach. In the past only a few individuals would be able to be heard on a very large scale. That has changed dramatically. Individuals who learn how to publish on the web (or Intranets) on a regular basis and understand this new medium's ways of propagating information, can greatly increase their power to influence others with their ideas. This can be done at a cost that was completely unthinkable just a few years ago.

15. It's a way to move ahead to new challenges

One of the most unnoticed benefits of sharing information, especially through carefully written reports, documents, books, etc. is the fact that by writing, people are not only sharing what they know. They are also learning, synthesizing and building knowledge. Individuals who do not write down their thoughts, ideas and experiences often may get entangled in unresolved reasoning and, therefore, not move ahead to new challenges. Academia has learned that for a long time. PhD dissertations, Masters theses and articles have helped individuals not only to test their knowledge in front of their peers, but also to gain experience in organizing their ideas, preparing them for higher levels of achievements.

16. Knowledge workers are now “carrying their portfolio”

Architects, designers and craftsmen have been carrying and showing their portfolio for a long time. Knowledge workers are starting to do the same. In many leading organizations it is now possible to look at the portfolio of individuals' internal publications very easily. The outputs of many individuals are also being displayed widely for anyone to consult on the web. Thus, constantly sharing is also a way to build ones' own portfolio.

17. People need networks in order to solve complex problems

Innovations are increasingly dependent on the combination of different skills and different fields of knowledge. Those who do not share frequently are also less likely to have access to networks that will help them solve complex problems. In a way, developing networks through constant sharing is like an exercise to augment one's intelligence. Smarter people these days are people who rely not only on their own experience and knowledge, but that can also easily tap into many different skills, experiences and knowledge.

18. People need to “belong”

Sharing helps people to bond with others in ways that help them to build their own identity. Increasingly people are defining themselves by their knowledge associations. Knowledge associations are developed though through constant exchange of information, feedback, experiences and “war stories”.

19. Sharing improves self-image

It has long being held that as individuals move up the ladder of basic human necessities, self-image becomes the most important need to be met. Thus, sharing knowledge can certainly help individuals at this stage to feel more fulfilled.

20. It is a way to legitimize leadership and foster similar behaviour

If one wants other people to start sharing knowledge the most important thing is to set an example to others. People in positions of leadership that understand the value of knowledge-sharing in their organizations should, therefore, be the first ones to share valuable knowledge as often and as efficiently as they can.

21. Sharing creates substitutes that allow one to move on

As organizations go through reorganizations or need to find candidates for new positions, they will look to their talent pool and find out who can move on to fill the vacancies. In these situations it may happen that talented individuals may not get promoted because they do not have substitutes that can occupy their current positions. Knowledge sharing not only enhances one's promotion prospects, it also allows an easier succession and a smoother transition.

Final Considerations

These sixteen considerations may or may not apply to specific individuals and contexts. They are, however, a long list of reasons for individuals to rationally consider why they should share what they know for their own benefit. In the context of the ABIPTI project this list was the object of many discussions with individuals who were invited to participate in the CoPs. In our experience this approach was very useful and helped a few individuals to rethink their own views in terms of the opening question presented here: “If knowledge is power, why should I share it?”

Clearly some individuals have fully grasped the arguments above, while others were completely unmoved. It is, therefore, hard to be very assertive about the impact that the above discussion has had on the development of the CoPs thus far. It is our impression, however, that dealing with the power issues of sharing

knowledge early on and as openly as we did was a better approach than to try to change the cultures of the many organizations involved in the project. Based on this experience and a few other experiences in KM projects, there are a number of “rules of thumb” that are probably worth to be shared. They are presented in the table 1 below.

that commit their time and energy. This is, maybe, the key lesson of the project described here.

The initiative described here is significant in its ambition. Its success may have a profound impact on how Brazil integrates the considerable amount of knowledge that is available in this very large country, but that is

Table1: KM projects - Cultural Challenges & Lines of Action

Typical Cultural Challenges	Recommended Lines of Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↪ Lack of focus on the knowledge dimension; ↪ Need to establish long-term relationships before sharing ↪ High importance of personal contacts ↪ “Me too” attitude ↪ “What’s in it for me?” ↪ Fear of digital tools for collaboration ↪ Local view of the world ↪ Short-term perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↪ Have in-depth discussions about the growing need for collaboration from a personal and organizational perspectives ↪ Find leaders and work with them ↪ Help people understand how sharing knowledge can benefit them ↪ Try to understand what motivates people ↪ Use face-to-face meetings to discuss “real” issues that are relevant for the community ↪ Find topics that galvanize the community ↪ Help well-respected experts to participate – provide special attention. ↪ Use “fun” stories & pictures, etc.

The major lesson, however, is that implementing a portal, community or KM projects in general can be compared with large social change. It is never easy. KM is, in a big way, about changing attitudes, habits and perceptions of value. Thus, it requires people in the backstage that are really supportive and people in the front stage who are very attentive, sensitive to people’s ambitions, fears and motivations. The important role of moderators has been by many practitioners and authors. We will not dispute its importance. Good moderators can indeed play an important role by bringing people together, enticing people to speak, making sure questions do not go unanswered, etc. The toughest part, however has to do with helping most people develop a new “world view” about the key role that collaboration can play in their personal and professional life, as well as for the future of their organizations. This on-going exercise is critical and takes engaged and true leaders

currently very much dispersed. Geographical isolation is no longer a viable option for any organization or even country. Individuals and organizations now seek information and knowledge regardless of their location. This project is not yet a success in a traditional sense. Maybe, it will never be. The key metrics are not about number of hits, contributions, articles, etc. Although these items are being measured, the leadership behind this project is also very much interested in provoking a major change of attitude in terms of world view: from isolation to broad collaboration. The near future will involve continuing support the development of the CoP and gathering of good knowledge-sharing stories. The project will be evaluated based on traditional signs of valuable practices that were shared and reused, projects that emerged through the CoPs and also about the personal value that individuals are getting from participation. It is very clear, however, that it has already

changed the attitudes, perceptions and habits of a significant number of individuals. These kinds of initiatives are of particular importance to developing countries. Such countries do not have the resources of multinationals who are developing their own internal knowledge portals and leveraging knowledge from all over the world. The route for inter-organizational collaboration through knowledge portals is not an easy route, but one that is very promising. Indeed, it is probably a prerequisite for competing in the Knowledge Era. Our experience in this project has shown that dealing with people's

perceptions about the value of sharing knowledge seems to be one of the pillars for success in this kind of initiative.

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