

Book ‘Sticky knowledge’

barriers to knowing in the firm

Gabriel Szulanski

A short piece on the interesting book by DNV Senior Consultant Michael Kelleher

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Michael Kelleher has written a short piece on this interesting book by Gabriel Szulanski, who examined the ‘best practice puzzle’ and why senior management rarely likes to tinker with incentive systems preferring that they remain standard throughout the organisations. Szulanski identified a number of ‘knowledge barriers’ to transferring best practice. He calls them sticky knowledge.

The problem

Best practice is often ‘short hand’ for practices that are deemed to have resulted in better performance somewhere in the organisation and can be transferred to other locations, business units or processes. Such a

transfer is often considered to be a seamless process from donor to recipient, yet this cannot be further from the truth as many factors act as bottlenecks and barriers to that process. What is needed, according to respected analysts such as Michael Porter, is a good system for motivating people to transfer the knowledge acquired during those practices. From this perspective, recipients can hardly be expected to seek our better practice as it might be clear that their performance is sub-standard. Sources of better practice are rarely measured on sharing their know-how and have few incentives to do so. Thus incentives and motivation are at the heart of best practice transfer.

The book

Szulanski describes his research and, interestingly, his supervisor's initial reaction to his thesis and has identified a number a number of areas of stickiness that he argues are properties of knowledge itself and the organisation in which practice is to be shared. The research covered a large number of multi-national companies, although the results, from our experience, appear to be almost universal in their applications elsewhere.

The book names a number of stickiness predictors:

1. Causal ambiguity: the uncertainty about the successful reproduction and re-use of knowledge in a new setting
2. Unproven knowledge: when knowledge has been put to use for a limited time or on a limited scale
3. Source lacks motivation: when the donor is reluctant to participate or share their knowledge
4. Recipient lacks absorptive capacity, where the recipients lack prior related knowledge, shared language, relevant experience that make them less likely to recognise, recreate, apply successfully and value of new knowledge
5. Recipient lacks retentive capacity Lacks the capacity to persist in re-using knowledge
6. Barren organisational context, where organisational structures and behaviors can prevent transfer from being successful
7. Arduous relationships between donor and recipient, relating to the nature of pre-existing relationships and the strengths of the ties between them

The most important predictor being the lack of absorptive capacity, to which we would add the lack of time or resources to receive and/or apply new knowledge, a characteristic we find in many of our client organizations.

Commentary

The book highlights key areas of interest and challenges the notion that best practice transfer simply requires incentivisation, although doesn't exclude motivation systems as part of the solution to the 'best practice puzzle'. His important findings seem like common sense when first confronted, yet they go beyond surface levels of abstraction and get to heart of knowledge transfer problems. The survey findings suggest that the absorptive capacity of recipients is the most found barrier to knowledge transfer.

Whilst not challenging that overall finding, in our consultancy work, We have also found barriers to knowledge transfer associated with donation capacity, by which we mean the time available to donors to transfer their knowledge; donation capability, ability of donor units to know how to present their knowledge in ways meaningful to recipients that are also timely and situated in the recipients' real world.

What stands out from reading this book is that Szulanski has paid a great deal of attention to preparing his thesis in ways that engage with its intended multiple audiences as he plots in the introduction the chapters that might be of most interest to his audiences. As an example, this is a short book complete with the research design and copies of the questionnaires applied to the study. These are located in the appendix and do not impose themselves on the narrative.

This is an important book for practitioners, consultants and researchers in the field of knowledge management all of whom will gain something from it.

More information

If you want more information, please look at www.dnv.com/knowledgemanagement. Or contact Senior Consultant Michael Kelleher by e-mail (michael.kelleher@dnv.com) or tel.nr. +44 (0)1 495 774884.

For more information on Gabriel Szulanski, the Associate Professor at INSEAD, please take a look at: http://www.amazon.co.uk/Sticky-Knowledge-Barriers-Knowing-Strategy/dp/0761961437/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1253608531&sr=8-1