

Thinning Knowledge: An Interpretive Field Study of Knowledge-Sharing Practices of Firms in Three Multinational Contexts

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Tables and Figures

Table 1
Description of Multinational Firms in Sample and Interviewed Units

Firm	Sales; number of employees; number of countries in which it operates	Location of headquarters where interviews were conducted	Location of the two firm subsidiaries where interviews were conducted
Consultancy 1	US\$ 3.7 bn; 18,000; 26	USA	Austria, UK
Consultancy 2	€ 550 m; 1,700; 23	Germany	Austria, UK
Industr. Materials 1	€ 1.2 bn; 3,200; 26	Scandinavia	Austria, Canada
Industr. Materials 2	€ 32.6 bn; 95,000; 60	Benelux	Brazil, Germany
High-Tech 1	€ 375 m; 5,500; 16	Austria	China, India
High-Tech 2	€ 170 m; 1,000; 9	Austria	USA, UK

6 firms, 54 interviews, 18 headquarters and subsidiaries. Two countries designated as Benelux and Scandinavia for anonymity.

Table 2 --Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Construct	Variables of interest	Typical questions asked
Nature of the firm's knowledge and use of knowledge as a firm resource	1. Individuals' perception of accessibility of personalized and codified knowledge	How do you gain access to important information? When you are unable to complete certain tasks, to whom do you turn for help?
	2. Perception of value of available knowledge	How valuable or useful do you consider this information to be? When is this knowledge most useful to you?
	3. Patterns of knowledge use in the firm	How do you use this knowledge? In what ways is knowledge treated as a strategically important resource? How is it managed?
	4. Means and processes of knowledge retention	How and where do you store acquired knowledge? Which knowledge management tools are available in your firm? (list of possibilities provided as prompt)
Knowledge-sharing patterns and internal firm networks	5. Estimated intensity of knowledge flows within the firm at a personal and codified level	How would you gauge the frequency and intensity of knowledge sharing at a personal and codified level? How would you gauge the strategic importance of knowledge shared among different sites of the firm?
	6. Role of formal or informal networks in the firm	Of what nature are "networks" of managers in your firm? Are these formally or informally managed? Are there "communities of practice"?
Organizational structure	7. Organization, level of centralization, and control and planning mechanisms of the firm	How is your organization structured? Which planning instrument does your firm use? How are instructions issued?
Firm strategy	8. Basic competitive strategy of the firm; importance of local conditions with respect to customers, products, and cost factors	Who are your customers? What products do you offer? What are the key business drivers of your firm? How do local conditions matter (at your particular location)? Do local cost conditions have a major impact on the role of your unit within the firm?
Industry context	9. Basic nature of markets (regional, global or a combination of both)	In which markets is your firm present? What special characteristics do these different markets exhibit?
Organizational culture	10. Anecdotes about company culture to corroborate and deepen the information collected on all the preceding issues	Please relate critical incidents shedding light on (a) shared norms and values, (b) top management's leadership style, and (c) the firm's way of dealing with mistakes.

Table 3
Basic Findings of Cross-Site Knowledge-Sharing Practices

	Nature (codified or personalized) of shared knowledge	Basic function of cross-site knowledge sharing	Circumstances limiting the scope of cross-site knowledge sharing
Consultancy 1 and 2	Mainly personalized: Personal knowledge of individuals	Summarizing basic experiences and expertise gained by individuals on projects	Need for consultants to advertise skills yet avoid making themselves redundant
Industrial Materials 1 and 2	Personalized/codified mixture: Codified comparative benchmarking figures and personalized best-practice know-how	Benchmarking and best practice sharing (mainly in Industrial Materials 2)	High heterogeneity of context and latent competition across sites
High Tech 1 and 2	Codified data	Transfer of data and (rarely) technological expertise	Centralization of knowledge feasible in industry context

Table 4
Industry Context, Decentralization and Relative Knowledge-Sharing Intensity

	Industry context for knowledge use	Centralized/decentralized structure within the firm	Intensity of cross-site knowledge sharing
Consultancy 1	Substantial benefit from applying experience gained from prior projects to others	Decentralized, flat structure	Medium
Consultancy 2		Decentralized, multi-office-network	Medium
Industrial Materials 1	Pressures for rationalization of cross-border operations in the wake of global markets and mergers	Decentralized and relatively uncoordinated	Low
Industrial Materials 2		Decentralized on operational level, more centralized on strategic level	Medium-Low
High Tech 1	Primacy of standardized product design for global technology markets	Centralized	Very Low
High Tech 2		Centralized	Very Low

Table 5
Three Types of “Thin” Knowledge-Sharing Systems

	Method of “Thinning” Knowledge	Historical Examples	Contemporary Examples in ICT Era
Topographical	Specification of knowledge location rather than content	Personal Ads, Yellow Pages	Intranet/Internet Postings of CVs
Statistical	Condensing knowledge to numbers	Market Prices, Metrology	Electronic Marketplaces, Performance Management Systems
Diagrammatic	Condensing knowledge to image	Mechanical Drawing	Computer-Aided Design

Figure 1
Configurations of Knowledge-Sharing Patterns

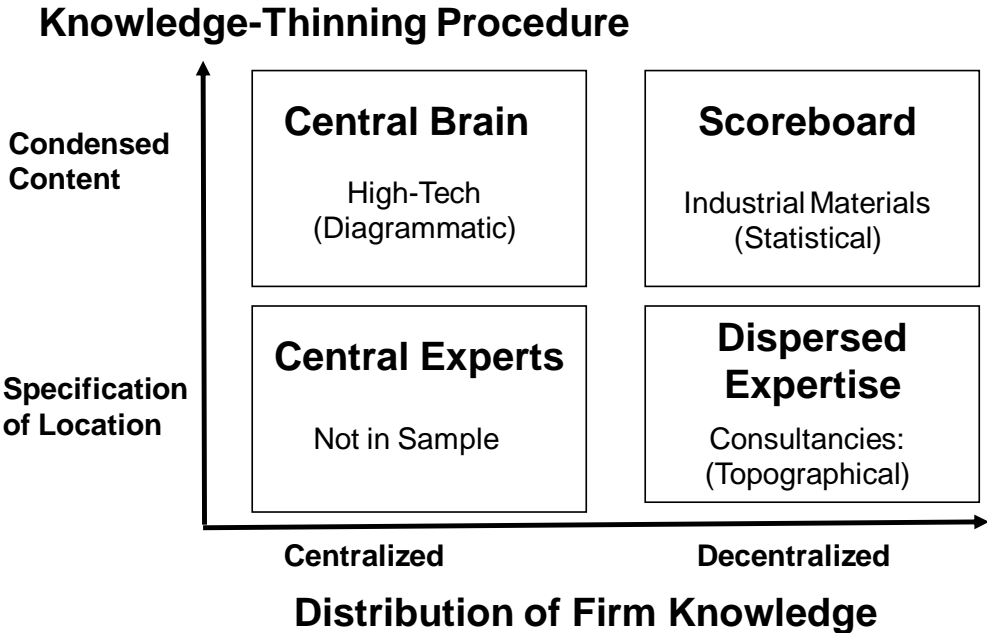


Figure 2
Differences Among Knowledge-Thinning Systems

